



Norfolk Coroner's Service

Carrow House, 301 King Street, Norwich, NR1 2TN

Telephone: 01603 774773 Fax: 01603 665511 E-mail: coroner@norfolk.gov.uk

Website: www.norfolk.gov.uk/coroners

9 April 2020

Deaths in the Community

The coronial areas of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Essex, Hertfordshire, Norfolk and Suffolk have reached the following understanding with regard to verification of deaths in the community.

At present this is restricted to a registered healthcare professional who has undertaken the appropriate training. In the majority of areas this is restricted to doctors, nurses and paramedics. In specific circumstance such as decapitation, decomposition other professionals such as police officers may verify life extinct.

This remains the position.

It is recognised, however, that during this pandemic, extra action needs to be taken to enable bodies to be moved through the death management process as speedily as possible, whilst retaining dignity for the deceased and ensuring that checks are in place to prevent anything untoward and that only those deemed competent to perform this important role are allocated the task.

Most regions are arranging for a multi-agency response to deaths in the community, including a representative from some, if not all, police, ambulance service, medical practitioner (ie doctor or nurse – presently practicing, retired or trainee).

The multi-agency response attends sudden and unexpected deaths. There are many sudden deaths in the community, either in personal residential homes or in Care or Nursing Homes which are not attended by this multi-agency response because they are expected. These deaths need to be verified and an MCCD issued to enable the body to be moved from the place of death to the Funeral Director and from there to place of burial or crematorium

HM Government Guidance: Managing the Deceased During a Pandemic created 17 March 2020, provides as follows:

2.28 The doctor completing the MCCD will specify the cause of death and not the fact. The concept of "life extinct, ie the fact, can be declared by a doctor, a police forensic medical examiner, or suitably qualified clinicians and paramedics.

*2.32 **Pandemic Influenza: Guidance** on the management of death certification and cremation certification states the completion of a MCCD must be distinct from verification that a person has died. Such verification allows the body to be moved from the place of death to a mortuary, body storage facility or the premises of a funeral director once suspicious circumstances have been excluded.*

2.33 Efficient verification of "life extinct" is important for ensuring an effective and seamless process towards disposal. Deceased persons should not be taken to hospital for verification of death. Local consideration should be given to making sure there is clear agreement on which individuals, and in which circumstances, can verify death.

We are aware that the following advice has been circulated:

We shared on LMC News (30-3-2020 21:33pm), helpful advice thathas written on this subject. The BMA guidance (used by the CQC) is quoted, and whilst we fully support this, it is important to acknowledge that the BMA guidance was written for a different time, and we need to be pragmatic about all deaths in the community.

English law does not require a doctor to confirm that death has occurred and does not require a doctor to view the body of the deceased person. We recommend that at present, the pragmatic solution for expected deaths, would be for the family or the care home to contact the undertaker, who is able to remove the body, and to notify the practice that this has taken place.

A GP can then have a video call with the undertaker to confirm identity of the deceased, and to visibly see the body and discuss necessary additional information, such as the presence of an implantable cardiac device in order to be able to complete the MCCD and cremation administration. Undertakers will be familiar with the Covid-19 risks of handling bodies, and government advice which recommends "placing a cloth or a mask over the deceased" to help prevent the release of aerosols.

This suggests that a family member or a funeral director can recognise the fact of death and takes no account of HM Government Guidance. It has been suggested a Manager of a Care Home should also be able to verify death. Diagnosis of death is a clinical one undertaken by a competent adult with the appropriate skills and training. It is inappropriate for a person who is not medically trained to recognise death, this would result in the body being moved from the place of death with no independent check on the body.

In view of the emergency legislation which has been passed, namely Coronavirus Act 2020, GRO Circular No 5 issued 27 March 2020 provides that: to enable a Doctor to issue MCD, attendance on the deceased prior to death may be by video link, so there is no need to attend in person. Most Doctors are not now attending Care Homes due to the risk of contracting Covid-19. If seen after death, the Doctor must attend in person (not by video) – the Doctor can at that time, verify the death and there will be no need for anyone else to attend. However, some Doctors are not attending after death when it is an expected death. This results in no independent medical check with regard to the body.

Nurses who are trained to recognise death are also able to undertake this role and it may be the number of nurses can be increased by use of retired and student nurses to attend following a sudden and expected death in the community with a view to verifying death and thereafter reporting to the GP practice with whom the deceased was registered during life.

We are aware that different coronial areas are taking various approaches to death verification and hope that this letter clarifies the position within the Eastern Region as a whole.

We would also like to take this opportunity to thank all of those involved in the care of the deceased and bereaved for your hard work and professionalism during these unprecedented times.

Best wishes



Jacqueline Lake
HM Senior Coroner for Norfolk

Caroline Beasley-Murray – HM Senior Coroner Essex
Geoffrey Sullivan – HM Senior Coroner Hertfordshire
Emma Whitting – HM Senior Coroner Bedford & Luton
David Heming – HM Senior Coroner Cambridgeshire
Nigel Parsley - HM Senior Coroner Suffolk