

Groundbreaking News

a newsletter for our colleagues who prepare and register death certificates

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Questions or Comments?

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Introducing Groundbreaking News

Thank you for taking the time to read the first issue of our newsletter, **Groundbreaking News**. We are very excited about this newsletter. We have had a similar newsletter about birth certificates for many years. We would like **Groundbreaking News** to be a source of information on all aspects of the death record. We want to improve how quickly death certificates are received with complete data. We would like to hear what you want from this newsletter. If there are topics you would like to see, *please let us know*. We will do our best to make reading this newsletter a good use of your time.

Staff Introductions

Terrie Bollinger – A name that is familiar to all, Terrie has been our Nosologist for many years. That is, she is the person responsible for turning a complex medical evaluation on the cause of death into the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) three or four digit alphanumeric code that is used for analysis. Terrie has frequent contact with medical certifiers to clarify cause of death,

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details of injuries and poisonings, and other issues relating to item 3 and items 27 through 41 on the death certificate. Terrie is a tremendous resource to our office and has been invaluable in maintaining Oregon's high quality data. If you have questions relating to those areas, please contact Terrie at (503) 731-4453.

Casey Finnegan – Casey recently joined the Center for Health Statistics as our Field Liaison. Casey will spend a great deal of her time out in the field working on-site with our partners, organizing and/or providing training, and doing other good work as a liaison. Although new to Vital Records, Casey has many years of experience in public health. She will be working on many projects, including updating the county manual, developing a partners' page on our web site, and this newsletter. If you have any questions for Casey or just want to say hello, please call her at (503) 731-4404.

Karen Hampton – Karen has been the Registration Unit manager for a short time, but has been with Vital Records for several years as a research analyst. Karen has ambitious plans for improved communication with all our partners (county registrars, funeral services practitioners, birth clerks, Medical Examiners and others). Nothing is holding her back except the need for 40 hours in a day and an additional ten staff to accomplish everything as quickly as desired. Seriously, we have divided the job duties previously performed by the registration manager into two positions – registration manager and field liaison. This increase in resources has long been needed to meet our dual goals of being available in our office and being available to our partners in their offices; combined, these result in the highest degree of communication and cooperation, and the highest quality of service for Oregonians.

Next issue – meet Jennifer Woodward, Kathy Cook, and David Hopkins

24-Hour Notices Required

Funeral service practitioners are required by law (ORS 432.317) to send notice to the county registrar within 24 hours of receipt of a body. Several county registrars have reported not receiving these reports, or not receiving them in a timely manner. These reports, currently submitted using the abstract form (Form 45-106), alert the county of the death. This is a practical benefit to the county since it provides basic information that allows follow up with the funeral home if a death certificate is not filed. In addition, the form serves (directly in some counties) as the death abstract file.

The State Vital Records office and several counties issue certified copies of death certificates based on faxed copies of certificates. This method of obtaining certified copies does not change the obligation to file 24-hour notices or death certificates in a timely manner.

Faxed Certificates

The memorandum dated April 3, 2003 set out the procedures and time lines for faxed certificates. When a certificate is faxed to the State Vital Records office, it is our responsibility to review the certificate as quickly as possible for accuracy and completeness. We will contact the funeral service provider no later than noon the following day if corrections are needed. This same procedure and timeline are required for participating county registrars.

The memorandum also stated that acceptance of the faxed copy does not

constitute filing the certificate, and original certificates must be mailed to the county registrar within 24 hours of the noon deadline. If there has been a misunderstanding and certificates have not been sent to the county within 24 hours as specified in the memorandum, please begin doing so immediately. Failure to comply with either the abstract report or filing the original certificate with the county could result in cessation of the fax service, among other remedies. If you need a copy of the memorandum, please contact Karen Hampton at (503) 731-4412.

Fetal Deaths

Unsure if the tiny baby was a fetal death or an infant death? If you are uncomfortable asking the parents, the hospital should be able to tell you if this was a live birth, in which case a death certificate will be required, or a fetal death. If it was a fetal death and the fetus leaves the hospital, a transit permit, found on the second page of Form 45-3 (6/03), Report of Fetal Death, and a burial tag are required. This is true even if the birth weight of the fetus was less than 350 grams and a fetal death report is not required. This form must be signed by the funeral service licensee or person acting as such, and sent to the registrar of the county where delivery occurred, within 10 days of final disposition.

What if the fetal death occurred outside a facility?

Although infrequent, we do receive fetal death reports for births attended by midwives or without any attendant. The

Medical Examiner must be contacted for any fetal death that occurs if a physician did not attend the delivery. ORS 432.333 requires that the Medical Examiner investigate fetal deaths that were not attended by a physician at or immediately after the delivery, and to prepare and file the Report of Fetal Death.

Hospice and the Medical Examiner

An increasing number of people are choosing to receive hospice care. This has raised the question (several times) of whether the M.E. must be contacted because the person who died was receiving medical care up to the moment of death.

If a person dies of natural causes at home receiving hospice care, the M.E. should be contacted, even though it is very unlikely the medical examiner would choose to investigate. As with all other cases, if the manner of death was not natural, the medical examiner must be notified.

If a person dies in a hospice facility, it would be treated the same as dying in any other medical facility and, if the person died of natural causes, the M.E. does not need to be notified.

Please work with your community's hospice providers and medical certifiers in contacting the M.E. when appropriate. Failure to do so will delay registration of the death certificate.

Which facilities should be coded as hospice?

Only one facility in Oregon, Hopewell House Hospice Center in Portland, is considered a hospice facility. If the decedent died at

Hopewell House Hospice Center, the place of death should be 'Other' with 'Hospice' specified. Many care facilities throughout the state have beds dedicated to hospice, but can be identified as the type of facility, for example, nursing home.

Hospice is both a place and a concept that describes a particular set of services.

Hospice service differs from other medical care in that hospice also provides psychological, social, spiritual, and practical assistance to the patient and family, in the patient's home-like setting. This provides an important alternative to a terminally ill patient when choosing how to live the last part of their life. See the Oregon Hospice Association's home page (www.oregonhospice.org) for more information.

Procedures for Amending Death Certificates

The Center for Health Statistics has received a legal review of the Oregon statute and rules on amending and adding information to the death certificate and has provided some clarification. The county registrars have been notified that these procedures must be followed for all death records received, regardless of whether the record has been officially registered.

On the Certificate of Death, items 1, 2, and 4 through 24 need to be verified for completion

by county vital records staff. County vital records staff may change obvious typos, transposition of letters in words of common knowledge, and/or a misspelled city/state on the original death certificate. If any of the information is incomplete or not accurate, the funeral service practitioner will be contacted for the needed information. A completed signed affidavit to correct a death certificate will be required to make any changes to these items, other than the obvious errors mentioned (ORS 432.235, OAR 333-11-0061). The vital records office may make the change based on a faxed affidavit from the funeral home.

If the Informant Changes an Item

If the informant needs to change any of the information for items 1, 2, or 4 through 24, (incorrect information provided to the funeral home or funeral home no longer active with the record), an affidavit must be completed and signed by the informant. For corrections filed by informants, the vital record must have the original signature; therefore the change *cannot* be made based on a faxed document.

If There are Changes to the Medical Information

For the medical portion of the certificate, (items 3 and 27 through 41f), county staff can make additions or minor corrections without an affidavit only on items that can be easily verified by independent means, for example, the Board of Medical Examiner's web site. County staff cannot change any other item in this section on the original certificate without a correction affidavit that has been signed by the certifying physician,

nurse practitioner, or physician assistant whose signature appears on the death certificate. The correction affidavit from the certifier requires an original signature and cannot be accepted by fax.

If the name in Item 34 clearly doesn't match the signature in Item 29, the county will need to contact the funeral home to obtain the appropriate documentation from the certifier who signed the certificate correcting the typed name, title and address.

Amendment Fee

A fee of \$50 is required to amend a death certificate if the amendment is filed more than one year after the date of death. (OAR 333-011-0106(7)) This fee includes one certified copy of the amended death certificate. However, no fee is charged for amendments to the cause of death filed by the physician or medical examiner that signed the death certificate.

Replacing Corrected Copies

The State Vital Records office will replace copies issued by counties, if needed after amendment. In some cases, county offices may also replace copies issued by the state, if amendments are received when the original is still at the county. Beginning in December 2003, there is a \$20 fee for replacing certificates. The charge for replacing certificates may be waived if replacing one to three certificates, but must be collected when replacing four or more. Incorrect certificates must be returned to qualify as replacements.

Death Certificate Form

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Some medical certifiers have asked which pages of the Certificate of Death, Form 45-2 (8/03) are required at the time they sign the death certificate. Attached is a letter explaining the purpose and destination of each page of the death certificate. Please feel free to share this letter if medical certifiers in your area have questions or general concerns about the completeness or legality of the certificate. In addition to the information required on pages one and two, the third (yellow) and fourth (green) pages provide for permission for transit or final disposition of remains.

For final disposition, the bottom portion of the yellow page must be completed, signed, and sent to the registrar of the county of death within 10 days of disposition. On the reverse side of the yellow page you will find the addresses and phone numbers of Oregon's county registrars.

The bottom portion of the green page must also be completed and signed. The green page is retained by the person in charge of the place of final disposition, such as the cemetery or crematory.

Disposition Out-of-State

Currently, the only permit allowing transport of remains for final disposition in another state is the properly completed green copy from the Certificate of Death, Form 45-2, which is referred to in the paragraph above. The Mortuary and Cemetery Board issued a letter dated July 27, 2004, that explains in further detail the rules and requirements of out of state disposition. This letter is available on the Board's website, www.oregon.gov/MortCem, under Compliance Issues. For further information contact the Mortuary and Cemetery

Board, State Office Building, 800 NE Oregon Street, Suite 430, Portland, OR 97232. The Board may be reached at (503) 731-4040.

You may order Certificate of Death Forms 45-2 or Report of Fetal Death Forms 45-3 using Request for Vital Records Forms and Tags available from the Oregon Vital Records office. You may fax your request to (503) 731-3076, or order by mail from the Center for Health Statistics, 800 NE Oregon Street, Suite 225, Portland, OR 97232-2162.

Donation as the Method of Final Disposition

There has been an increasing interest in how often bodies are donated. In the past, we asked funeral service practitioners to mark a single box for Method of Disposition (Item 20a). At that time, if a body was donated to OHSU and later cremated, only “cremation” would be marked as the method of disposition.

In response to the increased interest, we are asking funeral service practitioners to report donation in addition to another method of final disposition, if relevant. This is regardless of whether some or all of the body is later cremated or buried. For example, if a body is donated to OHSU and later cremated, both donation and cremation will be marked as the final disposition. If you have any questions on how to report final disposition, please contact Karen Hampton at (503) 731-4412.

Mea Culpa Karen Hampton

My apologies to funeral directors, county registrars, and their staff about a recent

miscommunication regarding decedents’ names and dates (whether alpha or numeric) required on the death certificate.

We recently asked counties to collect alphanumeric dates, e.g., October 8, 2004 rather than 10/8/2004, for all dates on the death certificate. We included in that Item 30 which is the date the medical certifier signs. This is incorrect. We need the date of death, the date of birth, and the date pronounced dead, (if a Medical Examiner case), to be alphanumeric if possible. Dates signed, including Items 30 and 33, can be numeric only. We do not send records back to funeral homes if the dates come in numeric form and we will not require the county vital records offices to do so.

Unfortunately, Lane County acted with good faith and began requiring the dates to be in the format we had instructed. I want to thank Miriam Bolton and her staff for their hard work in following our instructions. Although the mistake was from our office, it created more work for both their office and the funeral homes’ staff. The most sincere apology doesn’t seem enough, so tell a joke at our expense. But please don’t doubt our good faith in following Oregon laws and rules relating to vital records.

On the bright side, (we always look for the bright side), this has further energized us to update the county manuals. We need to give the counties current information that matches similar actions in the State office, so they can continue doing a great job with confidence. This newsletter is another method we will use to share timely information with funeral services practitioners and the counties. Watch

for it quarterly. And please give us suggestions for topics to be included.