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Matters of Record

News from the Center for Health Statistics concerning the Oregon Death Certificate

Fall 2008

Going, going, gone.....

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1) Starting January 1, 2009, orders for **faxed death certificates** will **no longer** be accepted at either County or State Vital Records offices. We will be sending other reminders to you as January draws near, but consider this your First Notice!

We are discontinuing the faxed orders because there are simply too many problems with them.

- The quality of the certified copies is dismal due to the faxing transmission;
- Funeral homes are often late filing the official death certificate with the County or the State once they have received the certified copies of the faxed certificate;
- We often find discrepancies between the faxed version and the final version of the death certificate;
- We sometimes wind up with duplicate death certificates for the same decedent when we allow faxed orders;
- Families are confused when they are unable to obtain additional copies of a death certificate that has not been registered at the state yet.

2) As you all should be aware by now, the fillable-pdf version of the death certificate was phased out as of May 1 of this year. You may still roll the 3-part paper form into your typewriters but, if you want to use a computer, you must enter the death certificate into the Electronic Death Registration System.

If you haven't plugged in your biometric device or used EDRS since you attended training back in 2006 or 2007, we would like to give you training and technical support to get you back on track.

Call Kerry Lionadh, OVERS Training Coordinator, at 971-673-1197.



Amendments: Electronic vs. Paper

Here's our Number One tip: if you enter a death certificate on the Electronic Death Registration System (EDRS), you should amend the record electronically once it is registered by the state. Electronic amendments take only 1-2 days to process.

How do you do this? Once your record has a State File Number (SFN), you can access the Amendments function under "Other Links" in the Menu section. While the screens are fairly easy to navigate through on your own, there is a tutorial explaining electronic amendments on our website at http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/overs/docs/tu_amendments.pdf

Remember that you may only make electronic amendments for items in the "Personal" section of the death certificate. While "Place of Death" may be *entered* by anyone who starts the death certificate, it is considered to be a part of the "medical" portion of the certificate. Only the medical certifier or Medical Examiner may *amend* "Place of Death" electronically once medical certification has been requested or the certificate has been referred to the Medical Examiner.

If you are using EDRS, and you find that you need to correct a record after you have "dropped to paper" (but before the record is registered), fill out a paper correction affidavit and take it to the County with the death certificate. Place of Death may be corrected with an affidavit from a funeral director for fully paper or hybrid death certificates. The County can amend the record before making certified copies, then send the affidavit to the state along with the death certificate. When the Center for Health Statistics finishes doing data entry for the certificate, the electronic record will reflect the changes made at the County.

Not Allowed: Color Copies

A funeral director's purple striped color copy of a "drop-to-paper" death certificate, presumably intended for the decedent's file, was mistakenly sent to a County vital record office where it was registered and certified copies made from it. Shortly after, the original certificate arrived in the mail with an order for certified copies which had already been issued from the color copy.

A color copy of a death certificate should NEVER be made. When a color copy is prepared, it is a violation of ORS 432.180 (4) which states that "No person may prepare or issue any certificate that purports to be an original, certified copy or copy of a vital record or vital report....." Obviously, in this case, the copy was so good that both the funeral director and the county registrar believed it to be the original.

If you need to have a copy of the death certificate for the decedent's file, make a Working Copy from EDRS; or you could make a black-and-white photocopy of the

certificate showing the cause of death and medical certifier signature as long as the *County Registrar's* signature and filing date are not on the record.

The purple stripe on a death certificate indicates that it is an original document. Please do not create duplicate "originals" by making color copies.

Final Disposition Q & A

Q: If a decedent will be buried in Seattle, Washington, what should I choose as the Method of Disposition?

A: Since the body will not be buried in Oregon, "Removal from State" is the Method of Disposition. The word "Burial", followed by the name of the cemetery, may be entered in the "Place of Disposition" field.

Q: What if I'm taking the body out of state to be cremated, but am bringing the cremains back to Oregon to give to the decedent's family?

A: If a body is removed from Oregon, even if only for the convenience of the nearest crematorium, the death record should indicate "Removal from State".

Q: If a decedent's body is being donated to MedCure or BioGift, what should be the Method of Disposition?

A: In these cases, the Method of Disposition should be "Donation and Cremation". Only a licensed funeral director can sign the death certificate on behalf of these or similar organizations. MedCure and BioGift may not be listed as "Funeral Facilities" since they are not licensed in the state of Oregon; the licensed crematory that handles the cremation should be the "Place of Disposition."

Q: When I choose "Cremation" or "Donation and Cremation", I get a new screen called "Cremation Clearance" in the Other Links menu section. What's up with that?

A: When you choose these methods of Final Disposition, the EDRS pops this in because some of the other states using this system require a Cremation Clearance form from the Medical Examiner. You will not be able to fill anything out here.....instead, you will get an error message that says: "Improper User Setup for Action Requested. Please Contact Your System Administrator" So please DON'T contact us.....we can't do anything about this link right now!

What Funeral Facilities May Order Death Certificates

Only the funeral facility of record on the death certificate may order certified copies. Parent corporations, subsidiaries, or other affiliated businesses of the funeral facility of record are not entitled to obtain copies of the death certificate.

Infant Death vs. Fetal Death

We know that the circumstances surrounding these reports are a very sad and stressful time for families, and that many funeral directors go to extraordinary lengths to serve families who have lost an infant. Please call us if you have any questions about

assisting a family who is dealing with a fetal demise, or filing a death certificate for a baby. This article provides some clarification on when an infant death certificate or fetal death certificate must be completed.

When an infant lives outside the womb for even a second, then dies, the child is considered to have been born alive. In such a case, there would be both a birth and a death certificate for the baby. The hospital or midwife would file a birth certificate, and the funeral home would file the death certificate.

When determining the age of a newborn under one year, funeral directors must be precise in their calculations of months, days, hours, and minutes. Use minutes for babies less than one hour old, hours for babies less than 24 hours old, days for babies less than one month old, and months for babies at least one month but less than one year old.

At the Center for Health Statistics, these death certificates are compared to the birth certificates which show the time of birth, and funeral directors are sometimes required to file affidavits to correct an age of “1 day” to say, “19 hours, 33 minutes”. Funeral directors should attempt to find out the time of birth, as well as the time of death, for an infant who dies before its first birthday.

Under certain conditions, birth attendants are required to file a Fetal Death Report. If the fetus is not delivered alive, is greater than 350 grams in weight, or if gestation is longer than 20 weeks, this report must be completed by the hospital, attending physician, or Medical Examiner. In some cases, a birth attendant will file this report even if the fetus is outside of these parameters, if asked to do so by the parents. For any cases of fetal death when a report has been filed, the Center for Health Statistics will issue, upon request, a Commemorative Certificate of Stillbirth.

Regardless of whether a fetal death report is *required* to be filed, the disposal-transit permit section of the report must be completed for any fetus removed from a medical facility. In addition, a burial or cremation tag must be supplied by the funeral director and assigned to the fetus.

OVERS Changes Ahead...

Now that the death module of OVERS is fully operational, the OVERS team is shifting into maintenance mode as we enter into a less resource-intensive phase of the project.

Larry Kruggel (Medical Certifier recruitment and training), Sandy Elledge (Logistics and Help Desk coordination), and Robb Keller (Software development) left the project when their positions ended. These three staff members have made significant contributions to the success of the OVERS rollout and we wish them well in their future endeavors.

Although the project team will be smaller, our users will continue to receive necessary support. We are actively planning for a smooth transition but you may notice a few minor differences.

- We will continue to provide support for existing users but no longer actively recruit new users. This means that we will no longer initiate contact with medical certifiers that haven't indicated an interest in EDRS. We will continue to contact those who contact us and indicate an interest in using EDRS.
- Classroom training will be replaced by on-line training in the form of live webinars and web tutorials.
- Help Desk resources will be available at a level that corresponds with the steady decline in the number of help desk calls. The Help Desk hours of operation will remain the same (Monday - Friday, 8 am – 5 pm).

Training is just a click away!

We now provide live training webinars on a monthly basis. These demonstrations are designed as introductory courses for first-time users of the system or for users who need a refresher on the basics.

To view the monthly schedule, visit the OVERS project website at <http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/overs/training.shtml>. There you will also find additional resources such as User Guides and self-paced tutorials.

If you have several users and would like to request training tailored to the needs of your facility contact Kerry Lionadh, the OVERS Training Coordinator, at 971-673-1197 or by email at kerry.l.lionadh@state.or.us.

Place of Death: Decedent Residence – Hospice

When selecting a place of death using the Electronic Death Registration System (EDRS), funeral directors should have noticed a new selection in the drop-down list: Decedent Residence – Hospice. We have added this option due to the passage of Senate Bill 16 during the 2007 Oregon Legislative Session. This bill amended ORS 443.850 (the state law governing licensure of hospice facilities) to state that “A hospice program is an institution for purposes of ORS 146.100.”

Why should funeral directors pay attention to this new legislation? It all has to do with question 46 on the paper death certificate: “Was case referred to Medical Examiner?” or its counterpart in EDRS: “Was Medical Examiner or Coroner contacted?”

Under this new law, if a person dies at home while under hospice care, the Medical Examiner is no longer required to *investigate*, but must still be *notified* of such deaths if hospice care was initiated less than 24 hours prior to death.

How should a funeral director document this circumstance?

- If using EDRS, select “Decedent’s Residence – Hospice” as the Type of Place of Death. Leave “Facility Name” blank because the death did not occur in a hospice facility. Then type in Decedent’s residential address.* When referring electronically for medical certification, tell the physician (in the Message Box) whether or not the Medical Examiner was notified of the death, so that the medical certifier can appropriately fill in the Other Factors screen.
- If using the paper death certificate, type “Decedent’s Residence – Hospice” in field 29 (“Place of Death”). Leave field 30 blank. Type the decedent’s residential address in fields 31- 34 (“Location of Death”, etc.). Attach a note to the death certificate informing the physician whether or not the Medical Examiner was notified.

A death at home of a decedent who is **not** under hospice care at the time must be referred to the Medical Examiner because it is a “death requiring investigation” as described in ORS 146.090(1)(a) ...unknown circumstances, or (f) While not under the care of a physician during the period immediately previous to death.

*In future versions of EDRS, we hope to have the system auto-fill the decedent’s residential address when this Type of Place of Death is selected. But for now, we are relying on the expertise and attention to detail we’ve come to expect from funeral directors. Thanks for paying attention to this new legislation. It was written to reduce the number of Medical Examiner calls, and (in the vast majority of circumstances) it will achieve that purpose.

Presumptive Death

ORS 432.307(7) states that “When a death is presumed to have occurred within this state but the body cannot be located, a certificate of death may be registered by the state registrar only upon receipt from the State Medical Examiner. Such a death certificate shall be marked ‘Presumptive’ and shall show on its face the date of registration.”

There are two common ways for a person to be declared “Presumed Dead”. The first way is for someone to disappear and, after several years, a judge orders the state to consider the person to be dead. The death certificate comes from the State Medical Examiner’s office and often includes “court order” in the cause of death information. The second way is for the State Medical Examiner’s office to initiate the death certificate. This happens most frequently with a witnessed drowning in the ocean, but can occur in other situations as well.

In the case of a Presumptive Death, the death certificate will not list an ID tag, as there is no body, casket or urn to attach it to.

If, at a later date, the body is recovered, and a funeral home is handling the remains, the funeral home should not issue a new death certificate. Please call the State office to see if a death certificate has already been completed. The funeral home may file a replacement death certificate, or the State Medical Examiner's office may file amendments to alter the original certificate.

Race, Education, Marital Status.....Still a Problem with Paper Certificates

Whether or not you are using the Electronic Death Registration System (EDRS) to produce the death certificate, any paper records received in our office will be entered into EDRS at some point. If you have not entered data compatible with the system, you will receive a call or letter from us asking for clarification or (usually) a request for an affidavit to correct the record.

The EDRS will only allow certain choices to be made for the Race, Education, and Marital Status fields. For example, "Single" is not a system-approved choice..... EDRS requires a selection of "Never Married", "Divorced" or "Widowed" for a person who is unmarried at the time of death.

Using a number is no longer acceptable to denote grade level in the Education field. For instance, "12" could mean either "9th – 12th grade; no diploma" or "High school graduate or GED completed". Likewise, we cannot tell if "14" means the decedent had an "Associate degree" or "Some college credit, but no degree".

Race and Ethnicity also have very specific, and limited, choices available. In these categories, generalities are not acceptable. For example, if Hispanic Origin is "yes", the particular ethnicity is required (such as Cuban or Puerto Rican). These descriptors are always self-reported. Funeral directors should not "correct" race or ethnicity reported by the informant to terms they believe more accurately describe the decedent.

When the death certificate was changed in January of 2006, all funeral homes were sent a supply of cards which gave you the allowed choices for these fields. These cards are still on our website, and you may follow the links below to view them:

<http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/chs/registration/docs/racecard.pdf>

<http://www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/chs/registration/docs/educationmaritalcard.pdf>

Of course, if you choose to use EDRS, the system will only *allow* you to select available choices from the drop-down lists in these fields. No typing is required!

Whichever method you use, entering the correct data initially will save time and effort on your part, and will allow your death certificates to be registered electronically more quickly.

Use of Domestic Partnership for Marital Status

Funeral directors will notice there is a new selection under decedent's Marital Status: Oregon Registered Domestic Partnership. Use this designation for individuals who have formally registered as domestic partners in Oregon. In this case, the partner would be listed under Spouse's Name.

Do not select Oregon Registered Domestic Partnership for Marital Status if the partners are registered in another state or country but have not done so in Oregon. Use one of the other designations that appropriately reflects the marital status prior to entering into this type of domestic partnership. Do not put anything in the Spouse's Name fields.

If the informant is a domestic partner and the partnership is an Oregon Registered Domestic Partnership, select Registered Domestic Partnership as the informant's relationship to the decedent.

If the informant is a domestic partner who has not registered the partnership in Oregon but has registered a domestic partnership in another state or country, select Other for the relationship. In this case, you may specify domestic partner, Canadian domestic partner, or a similar description in addition to the "Other" designation.

Report of Death: Still Required

With the roll-out of the Electronic Death Registration System (EDRS), there has been some confusion over whether the abstract postcard is still required. It definitely still is.

The postcard, which provides the report of death, serves two purposes:

- 1) It notifies the County Registrar that there has been a death in the County, and that a death certificate is forthcoming;
- 2) It serves as a public record, which is required by Oregon law.

The abstract report in EDRS that will take the place of the postcard is an enhancement of the system which we have asked our vendor to provide in a future release. In the meantime, the abstract postcard remains the only method we have of fulfilling the legal requirements concerning report of death. Please continue to provide this postcard to the County Registrar within 24 hours, as required by ORS 432.317. Probably the easiest way to accomplish this is to fax a copy of the card as soon as possible. Another helpful practice is to indicate on the card if the record will be fully electronic. One funeral director stamps his cards with an "E" if he will not be bringing in a paper certificate.

County Vital Records offices are required by law to maintain death abstract information for two years, and funeral directors are required by law to provide it. So keep those cards (or faxes) coming in!

Cards can be ordered using the Request for Vital Records Forms and Tags, 45-43 form. This form is available at: <http://oregon.gov/DHS/ph/chs/registration/docs/45-43.pdf>

So Many Correction Affidavits, So Little Time.....

We recently reviewed 315 correction affidavits submitted by Funeral Homes, all of which were processed during a two-week period in July of 2008. These affidavits were necessary to make 571 corrections to the funeral director portion of fully paper death certificates. With the exception of a misspelling (or addition to) the decedent's legal name many of these affidavits would have been unnecessary if the death certificate had been completed on the Electronic Death Registration System.

Here are some common errors:

- 1) 51 corrections to the Place of Death. Most of these occurred because the place of death was typed in as "Hospital", which is not a valid Type of Place of Death. When you use EDRS, you are given the choice of "Hospital-Inpatient", "Hospital-Emergency Room/Outpatient", or Hospital-Dead on Arrival", and one of those choices must be specified.
- 2) 40 corrections to Spouse's Last Name. When you use EDRS, the system will give you an error message when a female spouse's last name is the same as the last name of the decedent. This field requires that the Last name be the "maiden name prior to first marriage."
- 3) 38 corrections to the Social Security Number. When you use EDRS, the system verifies that you have been given the correct number. If the family has given you an incorrect number, the system tells you why the number is incorrect and gives you 5 opportunities to re-enter a new number before certified copies are issued.
- 4) 9 corrections to "Armed Forces." These were all left blank, which EDRS will not allow you to do.
- 5) 8 corrections to "Inside City Limits." Ditto above.
- 6) 6 corrections to "Hispanic Origin." This was marked "Yes", but no nationality was specified. EDRS won't let you get away with that.

If you do the math, you can see that we are easily processing over 7,000 correction affidavits each year for the funeral portion of the death certificate alone. This takes up a lot of time and effort, both on our part, and on yours. It also costs you money: \$20 for an order of 4 or more replacement certificates. So, please, do yourself a favor and start using the Electronic Death Registration System *today* so you can do electronic amendments.

Street Number Field in EDRS

The street number field in the Informant's Address section is no longer a mandatory field. This means that, if the Informant's address is a post office box, you will no longer

get an error message stating that a street number is required when you validate the registration.

However, the street number field is still mandatory for Decedent's Address, since a physical address is required in this section, and you will get an error message if you leave the field blank.

Previously, the fact that an Informant had a PO Box as an address prevented records from registering without having State staff override the edit. Making this change allows a fully electronic record to register instantly if there are no other entries requiring State approval.

“For Veteran’s Use Only”

According to ORS 432.080, County and State registrars are required to furnish, without charge, “a certified copy of a vital record to the United States Department of Veterans Affairs, the Director of Veterans’ Affairs or any county service officer appointed under ORS 408.410 when the record is requested by the agency or officer in connection with, or for use as evidence in, any proceeding involving a claim based upon war veteran’s benefits.”

While the Center for Health Statistics has routinely authorized the issuance of 2 veteran’s certificates to funeral homes, we want to reiterate that these certificates should only be given *directly to a veteran’s organization*, not to a family member. At the State Vital Records office, we do not issue veteran’s certificates to families. Instead, we send the certificate directly to the organization. Copies should be clearly marked “For Veterans Use Only”.

Some counties routinely send a veteran’s certificate to the local VA office. They may choose to do this in lieu of a funeral home sending the copies. If more than one certificate is required, the funeral home or family member may request another certificate from the county or state, and the vital records office can send it directly to the agency that will provide the benefit, or to the funeral home if they are filing paperwork on behalf of a family.

EDRS is a success but we still have some work to do

Here are some usage statistics to show how things look:

- 2,583 total registered users as of July 1, 2008
- As of the 1st quarter of 2008, 44% of our records were either drop to paper or fully electronic
- In 2006, 9 funeral homes filed electronic death records; two years later, 163 did
- There are 1600 medical certifiers currently registered to use EDRS

We'd like these numbers to continue to increase. To that end, here are the top ten reasons for using EDRS. Help us market EDRS by sharing them.

- 1) It's FREE: There are no user fees for the system. Maintenance costs of the Web-based system are paid by the Center for Health Statistics. All training, support, biometric equipment, and associated software are provided free of charge.
- 2) It's Fast: Fully electronic records have been completed in less than 24 hours by multiple participants in multiple counties, making the death certificates available to families much more quickly. Electronic amendments take days instead of weeks and you can stop filling out and sending in affidavit forms.
- 3) It's Easier: Data entry is simplified, and corrections are a snap. Many fields are auto-filled for you.
- 4) It's Green: Using EDRS means cutting down fewer trees, and burning less gasoline (which also saves you money).
- 5) It eliminates duplicate data entry. After you type it on paper, *we* have to type it again into the EDRS system which slows down the registration process.
- 6) It calculates the decedent's age for you: this is a very common error which requires dozens of correction affidavits each month.
- 7) It won't let you sign until every required field is complete. This saves *thousands* of correction affidavits (see the article about paper death certificate errors.)
- 8) Social Security numbers are verified by the system. Before you finish the rest of the screens, the SSN results are back. This process also notifies the Social Security Administration of the death.....no more 721 form. And this means fewer replacement copies are required.
- 9) It's More Secure: EDRS uses secure Web protocols for communications to the server.
- 10) Finally: You will join the 21st Century! No more typewriter ribbons, white-out, or typewriter repair!

So please call your friendly trainers if you want to get on board. Kerry Lionadh is the OVERS Training Coordinator. Her number is 971-673-1197. Kelly Paige is the Vital Records Field Liaison. She can be reached at 971-673-1166.

We have been working for the past year getting physicians and medical examiners on EDRS. Out of 1600 registered medical certifiers, only 235 actually filed electronic death certificates this year. So we can use your help to not only encourage new users to come on board, but to get current registered users to use the system. We have a brochure that you can give to medical certifiers who might be interested.....and, of course, we provide free training and equipment to them as well.

Assistance with Russian Old Orthodox Death Certificates, Burials and Cemetery

Brother Ambrose, who works at Our Lady of Tikhvin Center near Mt. Angel, has been assisting Russian Old Orthodox families for over 40 years. These families subscribe to specific religious restrictions regarding handling the dead. The Russian community often handles the burials and subsequent death certificate completion and filing itself. Funeral homes may become involved if the families need assistance removing or storing a body prior to burial. If families from the Russian community need special assistance to complete a death certificate, Brother Ambrose may be able to help them. He can be contacted at (503) 845-3300.

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