

Guidelines for Completing a Death Certificate: What Practitioners Need to Know

Reading time:

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Date created: 13/03/2025

At some point in a practitioner's career, it is likely that you will receive a request to complete a death certificate. This is particularly the case with general practitioners, practitioners who operate at nursing homes and geriatricians. A death certificate is a legal document, and care should be taken when completing it. A request to complete a death certificate may come from various sources including the funeral home, the police and the Coroner's Court.

Ultimately, if you did not treat the patient immediately before the death and you did not view the body, you are not obliged to complete a death certificate. Some jurisdictions have provisions to allow practitioners to complete a death certificate without viewing the body.

1. In Tasmania a practitioner can complete a death certificate if they have arranged for another practitioner or responsible person to attend to report about cause of death.
2. In Queensland and the ACT, a practitioner may complete a death certificate if they are able to form an opinion as to the probable cause of death.

Are you a beneficiary?

If you have a close relationship with the deceased, or are a beneficiary, it would be inappropriate for you to complete the death certificate, unless there are extenuating circumstances. For example, in remote and rural areas where there are no other available practitioners.

Reportable Deaths

Before signing a death certificate, a practitioner must be satisfied as to the cause of death and that the death does not need to be reported. This information can come from the person requesting the certificate. For example, if you have been treating a patient who you know has a family history of heart disease and are informed by the police that they passed away from a heart attack, you can be satisfied of the cause of death. If the death is reportable, you are obliged to report the death to the Coroner. You do not need to complete a death certificate for a reportable death.

A **reportable death** is a death that is violent, unnatural or unexpected. This includes:

- homicide, suicide and drug, alcohol and poison-related deaths
- accident or injury-related deaths (e.g. road fatalities, workplace deaths)
- when the person's identity or cause of death is unknown
- healthcare-related deaths (e.g. during or after surgery or while sectioned under a Mental Health Act)
- deaths that occur in care or custody

If you feel you are not able to complete a death certificate, we recommend that you seek advice, either from the Coroner's Court or from MIPS. Please keep a record of any conversation had with an officer of the Coroner's Court. Once a death certificate is completed, it must be sent to the Registry of Birth, Deaths and Marriages.

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You should seek legal or other professional advice before relying on any content, and practise proper clinical decision making with regard to the individual circumstances.

Information is only current at the date initially published.

If in doubt, contact our claims and 24-hour medico-legal advice and support team on 1300 698 573.

You should consider the appropriateness of the information and read the [Member Handbook Combined PDS and FSG](#) before making a decision on whether to join MIPS.
