



SHHD/CAMO(83)11

SCOTTISH HOME AND HEALTH DEPARTMENT
St. Andrew's House, EDINBURGH, EH1 3DE
Telephone: 031-556 8501, ext.

12 August 1983

To All Chief Administrative Medical Officers

Dear Doctor

ACCURACY OF CERTIFICATION OF CAUSE OF DEATH

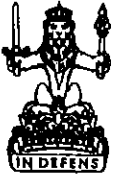
At one of our recent meetings reference was made to the slight change to be made by the Registrar General in the method of seeking further information on form SM2. As from 1 September 1983 this form will be sent to the medical records office of the hospital in which the patient died. If the certifying doctor is still present this form will be sent to him for completion; if he has left it will be sent to the consultant who was responsible for the care of the patient.

It is important that the doctors concerned should know of this change and I should be grateful if you would arrange for a copy of the attached letter to be sent to all clinical consultants in your area. A bulk supply will be sent under separate cover.

Yours sincerely

J J A REID
Chief Medical Officer

(Enclosure)



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The Medical Certificate of Cause of Death is an important document, not only for medico-legal purposes, but as the basic information for the production of epidemiological and statistical reports. As you know, mortality statistics have been the starting point for many worthwhile epidemiological investigations.

When a death occurs in hospital the medical certificate of cause of death is often completed, for quite understandable reasons, by a junior member of the medical staff. While this is usually done correctly and in the full knowledge of the facts available at the time, information coming to light later, perhaps as a result of post-mortem examination, is often not made available to the Registrar General. This is particularly liable to happen when requests for further information from the General Register Office arrive at the hospital after the junior doctor concerned has left.

In order to try to improve on the quality of information on the medical certificate of cause of death, the Registrar General for Scotland has agreed to introduce a slight change in the procedure for seeking further information on these certificates. As from 1 September 1983, the follow-up form (SM2) will be sent to the medical records office of the hospital in which the patient died. If the certifying doctor is still present the form will be sent to him for completion; if he has left it will be sent to the consultant who was responsible for the care of the patient.

It would be of great value if consultants were to take a particular interest in the completion of death certificates for their patients who die, and ensure that junior medical staff provide the optimum information.

You will be aware that there is a section (B) on the medical certificate for indicating that "Information from post-mortem may be available later". This

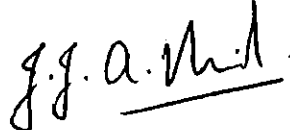
section should also be used where there will not be a post-mortem examination but where some alternative form of more complete information may later be available to the General Register Office.

A further aid to the improvement of death certification would be for pathologists to ensure that, as part of their autopsy reports, they always indicate clearly what they consider to be the underlying cause of death and transmit this to the appropriate consultant.

These suggestions for improvement in practice have been proposed by the Scientific Services Advisory Group of the Scottish Health Service Planning Council and have been agreed with the Scottish Joint Consultants' Committee.

For your interest I give at the foot of this letter four references of recent papers and articles on this topic.

Yours sincerely



J J A REID
Chief Medical Officer

- (a) Busuttill A, Kemp I W, Heasman M A. The Accuracy of Medical Certificates of Cause of Death. Health Bulletin 1981: 39: 146-152.
- (b) Cameron H M and McGoogan E A. A prospective study of 1152 hospital autopsies. J Pathol. 1981: 133: 273-283 and 283-300.
- (c) Editorial. Uncertain Certificates. Lancet 1981: ii: 22-23.
- (d) Report of Royal College of Physicians of London and Royal College of Pathologists. Medical Aspects of Death Certification. Journal of Royal College of Physicians, London 1982: 16: 205-218.