

## FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



MLAs

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Your Ref:  
Our Ref: COR/1666/2020  
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Dear MLAs

I committed to respond to all members on a query raised by Daniel McCrossan MLA, during the Ad-hoc Committee on COVID-19 on Thursday 14 May 2020 on the inclusion of COVID-19 on a death certificate and the process to challenge this decision.

Death Certification, as outlined in the Births and Death Registration (Northern Ireland) Order 1976, places a statutory duty on medical practitioners to complete a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD), stating to the best of their knowledge and belief, the cause of death.

When completing the MCCD the certifying doctor is making a clinical judgement on what caused the death. This will be based on their knowledge and assessment of the deceased and will also take into consideration the evidence available to them through clinical notes and the deceased's medical history. There may be good reason why a doctor would state COVID-19 as being the direct or underlying cause of death, or a significant condition which contributed to the death. This may be the case, whether COVID-19 has been confirmed by a test or where it is clinically suspected by the doctor.

In completing the MCCD, the certifying doctor is complying with their statutory duty to state the cause of death to the best of knowledge and belief.

In normal circumstances, if there is information on the death certificate that those close to the deceased may not know about, may not understand or may find distressing, the certifying doctor should explain it sensitively and answer any questions that the family might have. This is usually done when the certificate is given to the family. During the current situation however, the certificate is not given to the family and is instead, sent directly to the General Register Office (GRO) for registration.

If a family is unhappy or have any questions about the information on the death certificate, they should seek to discuss this with the doctor who certified the death. The doctor should be able to explain the rationale for the cause of death and address any questions the family may have. It is anticipated that in the majority of the cases this will resolve the concerns of the family.

If following discussion the certifying doctor decides to amend the cause of death, the GRO will issue a new death certificate directly to the family, following receipt of the necessary documentation from the doctor.

However, if the certifying doctor sees no reason to change the MCCD and the family are still unhappy with the formulation of the cause of death then they can refer the case to the Coroner for consideration.

In relation to guidance issued on Death Certification during the pandemic, advice was issued by the Chief Medical Officer in April to all medical practitioners ([HSS MD 28/2020](#)) on the terminology to be used when certifying a death where COVID-19 was thought to be a factor. It recommended the use of COVID-19 (confirmed) where a positive test result had been received.

In the absence of a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis, it advised that the certifying doctor should consider any available evidence and information and apply their clinical judgement as to whether the disease caused, was assumed to have caused, or contributed to the death. In such circumstances, doctors were advised to use the terms COVID-19 or probable/suspected COVID-19 when certifying the death. This advice is in line with WHO guidance.

I hope this clarifies the position.

Yours sincerely



**Robin Swann MLA**  
**Minister of Health**