



**Fifth Conference of African Ministers Responsible  
for Civil Registration**  
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CRMC5/2019/25

## Issue paper

# Death certification curriculum and infographic tutorials for physicians for certification of death

World Health Organization

Conference theme

*Innovative Civil Registration and Vital Statistics systems:  
Foundation for Legal Identity Management*



**APAI-CRVS**  
Everyone visible in Africa

Decade for Repositioning  
of Civil Registration and  
Vital Statistics in Africa  
**2017-2026**

1. Reliable and representative cause-of-death data, disaggregated by age, sex and cause of deaths are essential to inform public health policy, respond to emerging health needs and document progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. This information is abstracted from death certificates which are completed by trained physicians. Only high quality medical certificates of death are usable and the information abstracted from them has a major role in policy development, in decision-making and in monitoring the national health situation and health-care outcomes.
2. The only approach to obtain good-quality mortality statistics is to have deaths certified by medically qualified doctors. To ensure that doctors are able to competently certify deaths in accordance with International Classification of Diseases (ICD) criteria and standards, they must receive basic training in death certification and must understand the importance of high quality cause-of-death data.
3. The World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean is strengthening the production of high-quality mortality and cause-of-death statistics in cooperation with its member States. As of January 2019, the Regional Office has increased the capacity of more than 15,000 hospital physicians in 15 Eastern Mediterranean countries in order to provide ICD compliant certification of deaths, as part of the larger effort of improving civil registration and vital statistics systems in the Eastern Mediterranean region.
4. The WHO handbook for physicians includes certification of death, an introduction to ICD-10 and ICD-11 coding, and an introduction to ICD simplified selection rules. The handbook is used for all physicians concerned with certification of death as part of their on-the-job training and also as part of the undergraduate curriculum of medical students. It is intended to assist physicians and surgeons in writing certificates of cause of death in accordance with ICD standards. It attempts to explain comprehensively, but in simple terms, the aims and concepts involved and the sensitive nature of the information required.
5. The content and curriculum of the handbook were developed in consultation with 18 Deans of Faculties of Medicine in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

### **Issues for discussion**

6. A death certification curriculum, as part and parcel of medical education, will significantly improve the quality of cause-of-deaths statistics, thus making mortality statistics available on a timely basis.
7. Cause-of-deaths statistics are the most important piece of health information: they provide key information on what males and females are dying of, where it happens and at what age.
8. Such training will help to avoid the five leading errors in death certification:
  - (a) Writing only the immediate cause or mode of death in the death certificate, rather than the underlying cause;
  - (b) Documenting multiple causes on one line, whereas only one condition should be documented per line;
  - (c) Not specifying the site and nature of cancers and other tumors or local lesions;
  - (d) Listing clinically improbable sequences;

(e) Not documenting the nature of the injury in the case of deaths due to accidents, and not distinguishing between accidental or intentional injuries.

9. It is suggested that a training programme should be integrated into the faculty of medicine curriculum through forensic medicine, family medicine, public health and preventive medicine courses. This would be the case for both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. Moreover, it may be integrated into the curriculum of faculties of allied health personnel, such as for nursing and coders.

10. Member States have stated a need to decide how to incorporate this curriculum into their respective civil registration and vital statistics systems.

11. A presentation of the curriculum will be given by the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, which will also show a video infographic of how to certify deaths in Arabic and English.

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