

Stakeholder briefing: extending medical examiner scrutiny to non-coronial deaths in the community

Introduction and overview

A new statutory medical examiner service is being rolled out across England and Wales to provide independent scrutiny of deaths, and to give bereaved people a voice.

From 09 September 2024, it becomes law that all deaths that are not investigated by a Coroner will be reviewed by NHS Medical Examiners before a death can be registered.

The Medical Examiner Service rolled out across the NHS in England from 2019 with the aim of improving death certification and putting bereaved families and friends at the centre of the process. It provides an opportunity for the bereaved to ask questions about the cause of death and discuss the care that their friend or relative received.

This stakeholder briefing gives an overview to the role of the Medical Examiner and what the changes mean.

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What is a medical examiner?

Medical Examiners (MEs) are senior NHS doctors who have not been involved in the care of the person who died. They review the relevant medical records and discuss the care with the medical team who were looking after the person who died. This is to make sure that when completing the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD), the document accurately reflects the cause of death.

Medical Examiners or their team will discuss the cause of death with the bereaved. They have all had specialist training to undertake the roles and help families during these difficult times, knowing the bereaved will need support to understand more about the treatment and causes of death, or to understand the medical language used.

What is changing?

Currently, when someone dies, a doctor is notified and they decide if the death needs to be referred to

the Coroner. This is usually when the cause of death is unknown, sudden, unnatural or otherwise notifiable under the Notification of Deaths Regulations 2019. If the death does not need to be referred to the Coroner, the doctor would complete the MCCD so the death can be registered.

From 09 September 2024, it will be a legal requirement that once the doctor has completed the MCCD, it is reviewed by a ME. This extra step will strengthen safeguards by reviewing how people died, supporting strengthening of mortality statistics, and making sure only appropriate cases are referred to the Coroner.

The ME will liaise with the doctor and review the deceased's medical records so they can answer three questions; what caused the death, does the Coroner need to be notified, and was the care before death appropriate.

The ME office will also liaise with the bereaved giving them chance to ask questions about the cause of death and discuss the care that their loved one received.

Once the ME has reviewed the MCCD and a cause of death has been agreed, they will sign the MCCD and send the certificate electronically to the registrar, who can then register the death for the informant. The registrar will then issue the authority for burial/cremation, which the informant will be required to give to the funeral director. Death certificates can then be purchased from the registrar.

Why is it changing?

Introducing the Medical Examiner Service was a key recommendation in several high-profile independent enquiries, including The Shipman Inquiry and The Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust Public Inquiry. It has been recognised that an independent scrutiny of a death, undertaken by a ME - who is a qualified and trained doctor but independent of any care provided - allows the cause of death to be more accurately identified, and the circumstances surrounding the death to be more objectively assessed in order to identify any concerns about the treatment or care provided that may require further investigation.

How will Medical Examiners benefit primary care?

There are a number of potential benefits for GPs and the bereaved loved ones of those who have passed away. Although Medical Examiners will not replace GPs, and providing the support they wish to give, it can reduce workload by taking care of enquiries and follow-ups.

Medical examiners are also a source of medical advice for doctors completing the MCCD in more complex cases because of their extensive knowledge.

Importantly, it will also give bereaved families the chance to ask questions or raise concerns, in turn helping to identify where good practice can be shared with colleagues, or if improvements to care need to be made for patients and the bereaved.

How have we prepared for these changes in Greater Manchester?

Since the national legislation was first announced in 2022, NHS Greater Manchester has been working with NHS England, Medical Examiners, GP practices, Coroner and Registrars' offices to prepare for the introduction of Medical Examiners in the community. Medical Examiners already carry out this function in many cases and all hospital trusts in GM have been recruiting Medical Examiners to support the extension into the community. There has been a lot of testing of IT and clinical systems/software, engagement with GPs across GM to share learning/best practice and do everything possible to make sure the new arrangements work smoothly and do not cause delays for the bereaved at such a difficult time for families.

Will these changes mean a delay in registering a death or planning a funeral?

There are a variety of reasons as to why there may be a request for a case to be expedited. It is recognised that there may be concerns that this extra step of a Medical Examiner reviewing a death may impact on how quickly the death certificate can be issued and therefore when a funeral can take place.

Medical Examiners will make every effort, where it is possible to do so, to facilitate requests for cases to be expedited. They are working closely with GPs and Registrars to ensure, wherever possible, delays do not occur. Enhancements to the service such as the introduction of the electronic MCCD will help facilitate the smooth running of this new process.

Will bereaved families need to do anything different?

The only thing bereaved families will do differently because of these changes, is to have a telephone conversation with the Medical Examiner or Medical Examiner Officer (should they choose to do so). Families will have five days after the death has been reviewed and signed off by a medical examiner to register it with the registrar's office.

For further clarification to the changes, please contact your local Medical Examiner Office to discuss.

More information

[National Medical Examiner's guidance for England and Wales](#)
[Written ministerial statement 29 July 2024](#)