From time to time you may be approached by police or a family member to issue a cause of death certificate (Form 9) for a patient who appears to have died from natural causes.

This fact sheet addresses common concerns about medical practitioners’ ability to issue death certificates in these circumstances.

It also explains when you should not issue a death certificate because the death may be reportable to the coroner.

**What am I entitled to know about how the person died?**
You can and should ask police for information about the circumstances in which the person died or their body was found.

**Can I review the patient records first?**
You can and should ask police for a reasonable period of time to review the person’s records.

It may also be helpful for you to speak to other medical practitioners involved in the person’s care. Some examples include other general practitioners, specialists or treating hospital doctors. You may also ask to see records made by them.

You have **two working days** within which to decide whether you can issue a death certificate.

Timely issuing of death certificates significantly reduces family distress and unnecessary disruption to funeral arrangements.

**But I haven’t examined the person’s body?**
There is no requirement for you to have viewed or examined the person’s body before you issue a death certificate.

**I’m certain it was a natural causes death, but I don’t know the exact cause of death?**
In order to complete the death certificate you are required by law to form an opinion as to the **probable** cause of death, taking into account what you know about the person’s medical history and the circumstances of their death.

It may help to discuss your thinking about the probable cause of death with a colleague.

You can also discuss the death with a Forensic Medicine Officer (FMO) from the Department of Health Clinical Forensic Medicine Unit. FMOs are doctors who assist the coroner by providing clinical advice about reportable deaths. They can help you by acting as a clinical ‘sounding board’ for your thinking about probable cause of death and how to write up the death certificate.

**Contact:** (07) 3405 5755 (business hours, ask for FMO on coronial duties) 131 444 (after hours, ask for on-call FMO)

**But the person wasn’t my patient?**
There is no requirement for you to have treated the person.

You can issue the death certificate provided you have had an opportunity to consider information about the person's medical history, for example, by reviewing patient records or speaking to another doctor involved in the person’s care and you can form an opinion as to the probable cause of death.

*Issued September 2013*
I want to know the family is happy for me to issue a certificate
If you feel comfortable issuing a death certificate, you can and should contact the person’s family to explain what you consider the probable cause of death to be and why. Families are generally very appreciative of this contact and it gives you an opportunity to be alerted to any issues of concern that might better be referred to the coroner.

When shouldn't I issue a death certificate?
You should not issue a death certificate if you have any concern the person may have taken their own life or has died a violent or otherwise unnatural or suspicious death (e.g. accidental drug overdose, choking, traumatic injury) or you are aware the family has concerns about the health care provided to the person before they died.

In these circumstances, you should explain your concerns to police, who will refer the death to the coroner.

Any death of a patient with a disability who lived in supported residential accommodation or a patient with a mental illness who was receiving involuntary treatment at the time of their death is also reportable to the coroner.

Contact the Coronial Registrar, Office of the State Coroner for advice about how to report these deaths.

For further information:
Office of the State Coroner Queensland:

Births Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 2003 (Qld), section 30

For guidance if you have never completed a cause of death certificate before:

www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/48f07ae57b57ef82ca257027006d8f6/da94ec7234fa8023ca25750b000e92b01OpenDocument

This fact sheet has been prepared in partnership with the Queensland Police Service and the Queensland Department of Health Clinical Forensic Medicine Unit and Forensic and Scientific Services.

Issued September 2013
Please note: This publication was produced prior to the current government.