

Licensee Obligation to Sign Death Certificates

What NC law governs state policy regarding death certificates (DCs)? NCGS § 130A-115 outlines specific procedures for completion of death certificates, including who is authorized to complete them under specific circumstances.

Who can complete DCs in NC? By law, a death certificate must be completed by a physician or by a PA or NP who has been specifically authorized by their supervising physician to certify deaths.

Don't medical examiners complete DCs in NC? Yes, they do, but only in very specific circumstances. NCGS § 130A-383 states that a medical examiner shall complete the death certificate in situations where the cause of death is injury or violence or is judged to be suspicious or unnatural in some way.

What about deaths that are unattended by a treating clinician? As written, NCGS § 130A-383 says that unattended deaths (such as someone who dies at home under unknown but apparently natural circumstances) also fall within the jurisdiction of the medical examiner. However, the medical examiner system in NC does not have the capacity to complete all DCs for individuals who die at home. As a result, such deaths are often referred to the deceased's primary care provider.

If a request to complete a DC is sent to a physician or PA do they have to do it? It is NCMB's position that, if requested, licensees should complete DCs as a final service to their former patient. A DC is required for every person who dies. Refusals or prolonged debates among medical professionals about who should complete the DC are counterproductive and only lead to frustration and delays.

How should a clinician approach determining a cause of death in uncertain circumstances? It can be challenging to determine cause of death when the clinician may not have seen the deceased recently and/or there is no obvious active illness to point to. However, the state requires that the clinician certifying the death state a reasonable probable cause of death, based on review of available medical records.

Can a medical professional get in trouble if they "get it wrong"? No. If the clinician completes the death certificate in good faith, without fraud or malice, NCGS § 130A-115(f) grants immunity from any civil liability in the rare instance a cause of death is contested. The same law prohibits the medical board from taking disciplinary action.

How are DCs submitted? Since January 1, 2022, the state of North Carolina requires that deaths be registered online using the NC Database for Vital Events (NC DAVE).

Additional Resources



[Review the NCMB Position Statement: Clinician obligation to complete death certificates](#)



[Read NCGS § 130A-383 – Medical examiner jurisdiction](#)



[Read NCGS § 130A-115 – Death registration](#)