Healthcare Improvement Scotland’s team of medical reviewers are in place and ready for the launch of the death certification review service on Wednesday 13 May.

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The new review service has been set up to provide independent checks on the quality and accuracy of Medical Certificates of Cause of Death (MCCDs).

The main role of the medical reviewers, who are all experienced doctors, will be to:

- ensure that the required number of Medical Certificates of Cause of Death (MCCDs) are reviewed each year, and
- educate and support certifying doctors to improve the quality and accuracy of completed MCCDs.

Medical reviewers will also have a role in reviewing, verifying and signing off paperwork in cases of people who have died outside the UK and are to be returned to Scotland for burial or cremation.

Reporting to Senior Medical Reviewer, Dr George Fernie, the medical reviewers will be primarily based in Aberdeen, Glasgow and South Queensferry, although they will also spend time at NHS locations to educate and support certifying doctors with the new system.

Reviews will fall under one of two categories. For Level 1 reviews, a Healthcare Improvement Scotland medical reviewer will check the MCCD and speak to the certifying doctor. For Level 2 reviews, the medical reviewer will speak to the certifying doctor and check relevant medical records.

The new system will randomly select about 10% of all deaths for Level 1 review, with additional Level 2 reviews. This does not include sudden, suspicious, accidental or unexplained deaths, which are reported to the Procurator Fiscal, or stillbirths. It means that Healthcare Improvement Scotland will review about 6,000 MCCDs a year out of the approximately 55,000 deaths that occur in Scotland annually.

The death certification review team includes five medical reviewer assistants. Medical reviewer assistants support the operational delivery of the service and have a number of specific areas of responsibility including liaising with local registrars, creating review cases on the electronic case management system, managing the process of setting-up telephone contact between the medical reviewers and certifying doctors, and arranging for the transfer of clinical information when required for reviews.
NES support for healthcare professionals

NHS Education for Scotland (NES) has delivered packages of educational materials to healthcare professionals in preparation for the launch of the death certification review service.

Recent weeks have seen NES, which provides education and training to NHSScotland, issue a range of materials for medical and nursing staff, including:

- three online modules on the review process, completing the MCCD, and reporting to the Procurator Fiscal for certifying doctors of all grades (also available as DVDs for GPs)
- a resource pack for NHS Directors of Medical Education to distribute locally within their NHS boards (including presentations, cards, leaflets, and posters), and
- presentations, posters and leaflets for nursing staff not responsible for completing MCCDs.

In addition, Professor Robin Taylor, a respiratory consultant at Wishaw General Hospital, has been holding sessions primarily targeted at junior doctors across NHSScotland, to help them explain content of the MCCD and the new review process to families.

Professor Hazel Scott, Associate Dean at NES, says: “This has been an excellent opportunity to work closely with other key stakeholders, particularly Healthcare Improvement Scotland, to inform the content and development of educational resources to support the new system and process of death certification.”

A new website (www.sad.scot.nhs.uk) has also been developed to support healthcare staff by providing information on:

- the review process
- the process of certifying death, and
- caring for patients and families before and after death.

NES Associate Dean
Professor Hazel Scott
A wide range of stakeholders, including representatives from faith groups, have been involved in discussions around the new proposals for death certification and registration. We asked some of these representatives to give us their views ahead of the launch of the review service on 13 May.

“The new system of death certification and registration is a move forward to achieve better recording and data for future research in the health service. The new system requirement of completing registration before burial takes place may involve delay of the burial which is unwelcome by certain faith groups. Muslim faith requires the burial to take place on the same day of death or as soon as possible thereafter. The new legislation recognises faith requirements and efforts were made to reduce potential delays. The review process of a random sample of MCCDs may produce more delay and the system of advance registration is devised to reduce this delay for most cases. The National Advisory Group made every effort to streamline the procedures and reduce the potential delay caused by the new reviews. I hope that the new procedures will work to the satisfaction of all involved, especially the bereaved who are in a difficult situation.”

– Salah Beltagui, Convener of the Muslim Council of Scotland

“Along with other communities that have cultural or religious reasons for requiring speedy burial, the Jewish Community has been concerned at the potential of the new death registration system to impose delays. We do, however, welcome the steps that have been taken to minimise any delays resulting from the new scrutiny system, and hope that the availability of out-of-hours medical certification, electronic communication, and advance registration will mitigate this. Since there is a material difference between burial and cremation, in that after burial a body remains available for later inspection if required, our preference would be for permitting burial to take place before registration as at present.”

– Ephraim Borowski, Director, Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

“It’s perhaps not surprising that a healthcare chaplain would be interested in the new arrangements for death certification. Chaplains regularly work with families who have been bereaved; we may be guiding them through funeral planning as well as giving emotional and spiritual support. We’re also in touch with faith and belief groups, ensuring their needs are recognised and that NHS policies and systems meet those needs where practicable and possible. NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde has the largest minority faith communities in Scotland and we’ve done our best to communicate information and respond to concerns. The review process may often present challenges and there’s clearly a balance to be found between good governance and the expectations of a burial taking place as fast as possible, in particular within the Muslim and Jewish communities. I really hope that the new arrangements will reinforce the trust bereaved people have in the care the NHS delivers and its governance.”

– Blair Robertson, Head of Chaplaincy & Spiritual Care, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde
Other developments

Funeral industry roadshows

The National Association of Funeral Directors concluded a national series of roadshows to explain the changes resulting from the Certification of Death (Scotland) Act 2011. The eighth and final roadshow took place in Dumfries on Friday 20 March. More than 400 people attended the series, which began in Inverness in February 2015. A presentation from the roadshows is available at www.healthcareimprovementscotland.org/deathcertification

National Records of Scotland

National Records of Scotland – who oversee the registration system in Scotland, including death registration – advise that 450 registrars have been fully trained to use the new registration system ahead of launch of the review service on 13 May.

Revised cremation form

A revised cremation form (known as Form A) has been developed and is now available from the National Association of Funeral Directors (www.nafd.org.uk), the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (www.iccm-uk.com/iccm/index.php), and the Federation of Burial and Cremation Authorities (www.fbca.org.uk).

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