

Pneumonia Without an Underlying Cause-of-Death

When pneumonia appears as the only condition on a death certificate (or without an underlying cause), Deputy Registrars from Local Health Districts have been instructed to either ask the funeral director to obtain more information from certifiers of causes of death or to refer the death to a coroner or medical examiner. Pneumonia is a common complication of surgery and is also a common complication of injuries. If pneumonia is the only condition reported on a death certificate, more information is needed to determine if an injury or surgery contributed to the death.

Pneumonia can also be a complication of many diseases or conditions, especially those conditions that decrease mobility of the patient such as severe Alzheimer’s dementia or stroke. Pneumonia can be a complication of AIDS or conditions such as congestive heart failure. If the certifier is aware that a specific bacterial or viral infection caused the pneumonia, then that information should be reported on the death certificate (e.g., Streptococcal pneumonia, Pseudomonas pneumonia).

Pneumonia is a leading cause of death and may exist without any other underlying conditions. In those cases, it is best for the certifier to report “primary pneumonia.” Adding the term primary informs local health districts that there were no other underlying or contributing causes that the certifier did not report.

Acceptable Reporting of Pneumonia on Death Certificates

Example 1:

- 34. A) Pneumococcal pneumonia – 48 hrs
- B) Congestive heart failure – 1 year
- C) Ischemic cardiomyopathy - years

Example 2:

- 34. A) Pneumonia – 3 days
- B) Coronary artery bypass surgery – 6 days
- C) Arteriosclerotic heart disease - years

Example 3:

- 34. A) Primary streptococcal pneumonia–5 days

Example 4:

- 34.A) MRSA pneumonia –72 hrs
- B) Pathological fractured hip – 5 days
- C) Osteoporosis – years

Note: If a fracture contributed to death, then the case should be referred to a coroner or medical examiner. If the coroner or medical examiner choose not take jurisdiction, then the death certificate may be completed by a physician, osteopath, chiropractor, physician assistant, or nurse practitioner. If the fracture was not pathological then Items # 41-47 should be completed.

Note: If there are any signs of injury, trauma, drug overdose, abuse or neglect, contact your county medical examiner or coroner.