

2nd Edition of Care After Death: Registered Nurse Verification of Expected Adult Death (RNVoEAD) guidance

Introduction

The aim of this guideline and the accompanying competency assessment tool (See Appendix 2) is to provide a framework for the timely verification of expected adult deaths by experienced (assessed as competent) registered nurses.¹ It will enable staff to care appropriately for the deceased, in line with local policy, and minimise distress for families and carers following an expected death at any time of the day / night / week. It is in line with the person and family centred care recommended in national documents.²

Timely verification – within one hour in a hospital setting and within four hours in a community setting³ – is an important stage in the grieving process for relatives and carers and also a key time for support.

Families should be advised that there may be a difference between the time of the last breath and that which is recorded as the time of verification of death in the notes (this is the official time of death). This guidance ensures that the death is dealt with:

- in line with the law and coroner requirements (See Appendix 1)
- in a timely, sensitive and caring manner
- whilst respecting the dignity, religious and cultural needs of the patient and family members.

The guidance provides advice to ensure the timely removal of the deceased to the mortuary / funeral directors whilst establishing that the health and safety of others are protected, e.g. from infectious illness, radioactive implants and implantable devices.

Scope of the guidelines

Inclusion criteria:

The guidance applies to registered nurses (RN), deemed competent, working within their care setting to verify the death of all adults (over the age of 18) providing all the following conditions apply:

- Death is expected and not accompanied by any suspicious circumstances. This includes when the person has died expectedly from mesothelioma.
- The 'Do not attempt cardio-pulmonary resuscitation' (DNACPR) document is signed in line with current guidance.⁴

- Death occurs in a private residence, hospice, residential home, nursing home, prison or hospital.
- It includes where the patient dies under the Mental Health Act including Deprivation of Liberty (DOLS).

Exclusion criteria:

None advised.

Definitions

Recognition of death:

It is recognised that relatives, nursing home staff and others can recognise that death has occurred.

Verification of the fact of death:

Verification of the fact of death documents this formally in line with national guidance⁵ and is associated with responsibilities of identification, notification of infectious illnesses, and implantable devices.⁶ This is recognised as the official time of death.

Certification of death:

Certification of death is the process of completing the 'Medical Certificate of the Cause of Death' (MCCD) which is completed by a medical practitioner in accordance with The Births and Deaths Registration Act 1953, underpinning the legal requirements for recording a person's death. Currently, in order to issue a MCCD a doctor must have attended a patient in their last illness, and either seen the patient in the 14 days preceding death or seen the body after death.⁷

Expected death:

An expected death is the result of an acute or gradual deterioration in a patient's health status, usually due to advanced progressive incurable disease. The death is anticipated, expected and predicted. It is anticipated in these circumstances that advance care planning, and the consideration of DNACPR will have taken place. The death can be verified even if the doctor has not seen the patient in the previous fourteen days.

Sudden or unexpected death:

Unexpected death is a death that is not anticipated or related to a period of illness that has been identified as terminal. Where the death is completely unexpected, and the healthcare professional is present then there is a requirement to begin resuscitation. The national resuscitation council has issued clear guidance for the circumstances where a patient is discovered dead and there are signs of irreversible death.⁸

Sudden or unexpected death within a terminal period:

A patient with a terminal diagnosis can have a sudden death, e.g. an embolism. Death can be verified by an RN in these circumstances provided the DNACPR form is completed and the circumstances are discussed with the doctor. The death can be verified even if the doctor has not seen the patient in the previous fourteen days.

Do not attempt cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (DNACPR):

Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation (CPR) is a medical treatment that endeavours to re-start cardio-respiratory function. The advance decision not to attempt CPR and allow a natural death is underpinned by comprehensive national guidance.⁹

Responsibilities

Medical:

- A DNACPR decision is documented.
- Whilst it is good practice that doctors document in the patient's clinical record that an RN can verify the death, this is not essential.
- The doctor will be available if necessary to speak to families after death of the patient. This should be arranged at the soonest mutually convenient time.
- The responsible doctor (or if necessary a delegated doctor) will always explain / be available to explain the cause of death they have written on the medical certificate.

Nursing:

- All RNs must have read and understood this guidance and received appropriate training and be deemed competent.
- The RN carrying out this procedure must inform the doctor of the patient's death (both in and out of hours) using agreed local systems and document the date and time this was carried out in the clinical record.
- The RN carrying out the procedure must notify the funeral director /mortuary of any infections, radioactive implants, implantable devices and whether an implantable cardio-defibrillator is still active.
- It is the right of the verifying nurse to refuse to verify death and to request the attendance of the responsible doctor / police if there is any unusual situation.

Procedure

Equipment (cleaned according to local procedure):

- Pen torch
- Stethoscope
- Watch with second hand

Verification of expected death will require the nurse to assess the patient for a minimum of FIVE (5) MINUTES to establish that irreversible cardio-respiratory arrest has occurred, as well as specific additional observations.¹⁰ Any spontaneous return of cardiac or respiratory activity during this period of observation should prompt further five minutes observations.

ACTION	RATIONALE
Check for completed DNACPR documentation.	To ensure agreement of process.
Check that the NHS number of the patient's clinical records and deceased correlate and patient is identified correctly with name band – name, date of birth address or NHS number and that there are two name bands in situ.	To correctly identify deceased.
Identify from the clinical notes, any infectious diseases, radioactive implants, implantable medical devices.	To enable correct information to ensure others involved in the care of the deceased are protected.
Instigate process for deactivation of implantable cardiac defibrillator (ICD) if not already deactivated. ¹¹	To ensure the timely deactivation of ICD.
Adopt universal infection control precautions.	To ensure protection of RN.
Lie the patient flat. Leave all tubes, lines, drains, medication patches and pumps, etc. in situ (switching off flows of medicine and fluid administration if in situ) and spigot off as applicable and explain to those present why these are left.	To ensure the patient is flat ahead of rigour mortis, and all treatments are in situ ahead of verifying death.
Cessation of the circulatory system, i.e. no carotid (or central) pulse for at least one full minute.	To ensure there are no signs of cardiac output.
Listen to heart sounds with a stethoscope for at least one full minute.	To ensure there are no signs of cardiac output.
Cessation of respiratory system, i.e. no respiratory effort or no breath sounds. Verified by listening for at least one full minute.	To ensure there are no visible respirations.
Assessment of cessation of central pulse, cessation of heart sounds and cessation of respiratory effort should total five minutes.	
Cessation of cerebral function. Check that both pupils are fixed (not reacting to light or to any other stimulus) and dilated using a pen torch or ophthalmoscope.	To ensure there is no cerebral activity.
No reaction to trapezius squeeze.	To ensure no cerebral activity.

The RN verifying the death needs to complete the verification of death form in the clinical notes. Time of death is recorded as when verification of death is completed (i.e. not when the death is first reported).	For legible documentation and legal requirements.
The RN must notify the doctor of the death (including date / time) by secure email or their locally agreed procedure.	To ensure consistent communication.
The RN verifying the death must acknowledge the emotional impact of the death and ensure the bereaved family and friends are offered written information about “the next steps”.	To ensure the family are supported during this difficult time.

Auditing and monitoring

RNs will be expected to update competency by reflection on practice annually and keep this in their portfolio.

Evidence of audit – both organisational in terms of the processes of care after death including RNVoEAD, and the experience of bereaved relatives in line with national guidance.¹²

Appendix 1: Deaths requiring coronial investigation

- The cause of death is unknown.
- There is no attending practitioner(s) or the attending practitioner(s) are unavailable within a prescribed period.
- The death may have been caused by violence, trauma, or physical injury, whether intentional or otherwise.
- The death may have been caused by poisoning.
- The death may be the result of intentional self-harm.
- The death may be the result of neglect or failure of care.
- The death may be related to a medical procedure or treatment.
- The death may be due to an injury or disease received in the course of employment or industrial poisoning.
- The death occurred while the deceased was in custody or state detention, whatever the death.

More detailed information is available from the Ministry of Justice publication, ‘Guide to coroner services’.¹³

Appendix 2: Assessment of competence for Registered Nurse Verification of Expected Adult Death

Name of registered nurse:

Name and signature of trainer:

Date of training:

Assessor guidance:

- The competencies are a mixture of practical skills and knowledge and understanding.
- All criteria must be achieved during training to achieve competency
- Registered nurses (RNs) will self-assess at the completion of the training that they feel competent to perform this skill independently. Competence can be achieved at the first assessment, which can occur as part of the training.
- It is recommended that RNs reflect on this skill within their clinical practice at least annually during the appraisal process.

		In training		
	Criteria	Not yet competent or competent?	Not yet competent or competent?	Competent
Standard 1: The registered nurse is aware of their role and associated guidance				
	Guidance for staff responsible for care after death			
	Guidance re RN verification of death			
Standard 2: The registered nurse is aware of the following definitions				
	Who can recognise a death			
	Who can verify a death			
	Who can certify a death			
	What is an expected death			
	What is a sudden or unexpected death			
	What is a sudden or unexpected death in a terminal period?			
	Indications for DNACPR and the correct completion of documentation.			
	What is the definition of the official time of death			
	Deaths requiring coronial involvement			

		In training		
	Criteria	Not yet competent or competent?	Not yet competent or competent?	Competent
Standard 3: The registered nurse is aware of the medical and nursing responsibilities				
	The four medical responsibilities The four nursing responsibilities			
Standard 4: The registered nurse understands the procedure for verification of a patient's death				
	There is a completed DNACPR form			
	The patient and associated clinical record is correctly identified			
	Infections, implantable devices and radioactive implants are identified from the medical notes			
	To instigate the process for deactivation of implantable cardio defibrillator if not already de-activated			
	For universal infection control precautions			
Standard 5: The registered nurse is able to follow the procedure and carry out a patient examination to verify death				
	How to position the patient for examination and verification of fact of death			
	What to do with tubes, lines, drains, patches and pumps			
	To check the carotid pulse for one full minute			
	To monitor heart sounds for one full minute			
	To listen to the chest for at least one full minute, and observe to ensure no respiratory effort			
	To ensure checks take place over five minutes			
	To check that pupils are fixed and dilated			
	To apply trapezius squeeze			

		In training		
	Criteria	Not yet competent or competent?	Not yet competent or competent?	Competent
	That any spontaneous return of cardiorespiratory function, or doubt should prompt an additional five minute observation			
Standard 6: The registered nurse completes appropriate documentation in a timely way				
	How to complete the verification of death form in the clinical notes			
	To record the time of death			
	To notify the doctor			
Standard 7: The nurse knows how to support and provide appropriate information to the bereaved family and friends				
	Understands the potential/actual emotional impact of a bereavement on the family, and friends			
	Can demonstrate how they would support the bereaved at the time of death			
	Understand the potential / actual impact on surrounding patients and residents in communal setting			
	Can demonstrate how they would support surrounding patients / residents without breaching confidentiality			
	Understands the potential/ actual emotional impact of a bereavement for colleagues and paid carers			
	Can demonstrate how they would support colleagues and paid carers			
	Knows the support and written information available for bereaved family and friends			
	Knows how to signpost relatives to where to collect paperwork / what the next steps are			

Competency statement

I.....(name and designation) feel competent to perform RNVoEAD unsupervised.

Signed..... Date.....

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Review date May 2022

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Published by Hospice UK in June 2019.

Hospice UK is the national charity for hospice and palliative care. Registered charity in England and Wales No. 1014851 and in Scotland No. SC041112.