

Portsmouth City 
Primary Care Trust

Finchdean House
Milton Road
Portsmouth, PO3 6DP

Tel:

Fax:

E Mail:

Ref:

18 April 2005

To all Residential and Nursing Home Owners/Managers/Matrons, and Managers of
Community Hospital Units
East Hants, Fareham and Gosport, and Portsmouth City PCT Areas

Dear Sir or Madam,

Deaths of Patients in Residential and Nursing Homes and Community Hospitals

I write to clarify our understanding of the requirements for confirmation of death outside normal working hours. While it has traditionally been the role of the GP to confirm death, it is not a legal requirement for a doctor to do so. Indeed, any competent person may do so. The General Practitioners Committee has published guidance which explains that English Law:

- does not require a doctor to confirm death has occurred or that "life is extinct";
- does not require a doctor to view the body of the deceased person;
- does not require a doctor to report the fact that death has occurred; but ...
- does require the doctor attending the deceased during the last illness to issue a certificate detailing the cause of death.

In the case of expected deaths, the recommendations say:

"If the death occurs in a residential or nursing home and the GP who attended the patient during the last illness is available, it is sensible for him/her to attend when practical and issue a death certificate.

If an 'on-call' doctor is on duty, whether in or out of hours, it is unlikely that any useful purpose will be served by the doctor attending. In such cases we recommend that the GP advises the home to contact the undertaker if they wish the body to be removed and to ensure that the GP with whom the patient was registered is notified as soon as practicable".

A Death Certificate can usually only be issued when the attending doctor has seen the patient alive within the previous fourteen days.

Therefore, when death is expected and the usual doctor has attended in the last fourteen days, a competent member of staff can confirm that life is extinct. The undertaker may then be called and the usual doctor contacted on the next working day in order to issue a Death Certificate. None of these needs to involve the on-call doctor.

Of course, when a death is not expected, whether or not a doctor has seen the patient in the last fourteen days, the appropriate out-of-hours service should be called in the usual way.

We would therefore ask that in future Residential Homes, Nursing Homes and Community Hospital Inpatient Units in East Hants, Fareham and Gosport and Portsmouth City PCT areas deal with expected deaths out of hours in this way.

Yours faithfully

Debbie Tarrant

Associate Director (Primary Care Strategy and Development) for an on behalf of the Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Primary Care Out of Hours Service