



POSITION STATEMENT ÉNONCÉ

Nurses Association of New Brunswick • L'Association des infirmières et infirmiers du Nouveau-Brunswick

NURSE'S ROLE IN PRONOUNCING DEATH WHEN DEATH IS EXPECTED

Introduction

This position statement has been developed to broaden the application of the 1994 NANB discussion paper Nurses' Role in the Pronouncement of an Expected Death in the Nursing Home Setting to other settings and to clarify the nurse's role in situations where death is expected.

Pronouncement of death is the process of gathering information about a client's health status, analysing that data and making a clinical judgement that life has ceased by observing and noting the absence of cardiac and respiratory function.

In New Brunswick, there is no legal requirement that death be pronounced. However, it is common practice for physicians to pronounce death. Pronouncement of death in hospitals, nursing homes and the home is a convention used to formalize the occurrence of death and to provide assurance to relatives and the public that appropriate measures are being taken to ensure that individuals are indeed deceased before being treated as such.

Because there is no legal requirement to pronounce death, an agency policy can support the pronouncement of death by a nurse.

Assumptions

- Nurses have the knowledge, skill and judgement to assess the presence or absence of vital signs.
- When clients are expected to die and their care plans do not include resuscitation, nurses have the authority to pronounce death.
- In instances of unexpected death, the attending physician pronounces death.

Definitions

For the purpose of this document, death is expected when, in the opinion of the health team, the client is irreversibly and irreparably terminally ill, that is, there is no available treatment to restore health or the client refuses the treatment that is available.

Expected death is considered to have occurred when:

- cardiac and respiratory vital signs have ceased (pulseless at the apex and absent respirations) and the pupils are dilated and fixed;
- the death of the client has been anticipated by the client, the family and the health team; and
- anticipated events have been planned for in a written plan.

Pronouncement of death is not the same as certification of death.

“Certifying death” for the purpose of this document means determining the cause of death and signing the death certificate. Certification of death is a legislated function. There is a legal requirement for a physician to complete and sign the medical certificate of cause of death under Section 29 of the Vital Statistics Act (1979).

Nurses Role

Nurses may pronounce death, when the death of a client is expected, in both the community and a health care facility.

When a client's death is expected, it is important that the nurse, as a member of the health team (which includes the client, family or substitute decision maker) records the following information in the written care plan:

- identifies the client’s and family’s cultural and religious beliefs and values about death and treatment of the body after death;
- identifies whether the family wants to see the body after death (if the death occurs in a health care facility);
- identifies the family member to notify when the client dies (if the death occurs in a health care facility);
- identifies the most appropriate category of health care provider to notify the family;
- identifies, if necessary, the physician responsible for determining the cause of death and for signing the death certificate; and
- determines a time frame to carry out these activities.

When death has occurred, the nurse pronounces death, notifies the physician and as per the pre-determined written plan, proceeds with notification of family, notification of funeral home, authorization for release of body and preparation of the body for removal to designated funeral home/morgue.

Unexpected Death

In situations where death is unexpected, the physician needs to be notified to pronounce death, to determine the cause and sign the certificate. The body cannot be moved. The most appropriate person will notify the family.

Nurses need to be aware of legislation and agency policies which outline the situations in which a coroner needs to be notified and need to advocate for such policies if none exist.

References

Nurses Association of New Brunswick (1994) *Nurses' Role in the Pronouncement of an Expected Death in the Nursing Home Setting: Discussion Paper*. Fredericton: Author.

Province of New Brunswick. (1979) Vital Statistics Act. Fredericton: Queens Printer.

College of Nurses of Ontario. (1996) *Resuscitation - Appendix : Pronouncing Death When Death is Expected* (1999). Toronto: Author.

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