

YOU'VE ASKED

Is there a difference between “pronouncing death” and “certifying death”?

The answer is YES. Pronouncement of death is the process of gathering information about a client’s health status, analyzing that data and making a clinical judgment that life has ceased by observing and noting the absence of cardiac and respiratory function. Pronouncement of death is a convention not set in legislation 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. Pronouncement of death is not a “legal” requirement. It is a “nursing activity” that is supported by an agency policy. The principles that support RNs pronouncing death are:

- RNs are able to pronounce death when supported by agency policy;

Pronouncement of Death

Pronouncement of death is the process of gathering information about a client’s health status, analyzing that data and making a clinical judgment that life has ceased by observing and noting the absence of cardiac and respiratory function. RNs are able to pronounce death when supported by agency policy.

- It is appropriate for RNs to perform a final assessment and pronounce death for patients as a natural continuation of compassionate and timely nursing care; and
- In some circumstances (i.e. unexpected and unexplained death), the coroner is required to be notified prior to release of the body.

The certification of death or “certifying death” is a different requirement that is set in legislation (*Vital Statistics Act*). It is defined as **determining the cause of death and signing the death certificate**. On April 1, 2017, the *New Brunswick Vital Statistics Act* was amended, with respect to the duties of nurse practitioners. Specifically, nurse practitioners may now complete and sign the medical certificate of cause of death portion of their patient’s death registration. Also, nurse practitioners may have to provide information in their possession regarding any birth, stillbirth, marriage or death to the Registrar General of Vital Statistics, on demand. This duty to provide information to the Registrar General may include the disclosure of certain records (CNPS, 2017).

Certifying Death

Certifying death is defined as determining the cause of death and signing the death certificate. Certifying death can only be done by a physician and starting April 1, 2017, nurse practitioners (NB Vital Statistics Act, amended April 2017).

NOTE: This Ask a Practice Consultant article replaces the former NANB Position Statement: *Registered Nurses Pronouncing Death* (2014). This article is available on NANB’s website in the FAQ section.

For more information about this topic or any other practice situations, please call NANB at 1-800-442-4417.

References

Government of New Brunswick. *Coroner’s Act*.

Government of New Brunswick. *Vital Statistics Act*. Amended April 1st, 2017

Nurses Association of New Brunswick (2017) *Info Nursing*, Spring 2017. Fredericton: Author.

Nurses Association of New Brunswick (2014). *Position Statement: Registered Nurses Pronouncing Death*. Fredericton: Author. ■