

Funeral Professionals – What Do You Ask the Certifying Physician?

You receive a call from a family member that their loved one has died and they want your establishment to handle the arrangements. What steps do you take to begin the process of securing a signed death record?

When contacting the certifying physician for assurance the physician will sign a decedent's death record, what questions do you ask on that call? Of course you need to know if this physician will sign, and obtaining that assurance will be one of the first questions you ask. But don't stop there. Do you know that you also need to ask another important question, **“Was there any external cause or factor that should be referred to the medical examiner for their review?”** This statement could make you a best friend of the medical examiner. Florida Statute [406.11](#) provides a list of external factors that define the jurisdiction of the medical examiner. Think about it, what happens if you don't ask the question, you only ask if the death was of natural causes; you ship the deceased out of state, bury or entomb the body and find out shortly thereafter that the person had suffered a fall or died from delayed complications of a criminal assault. Do you want to be the one to tell the family their loved one must come back to Florida or be disinterred? Do you want to be the one to make that call to your medical examiner? What will you tell the medical examiner when asked why you did not let them know of the case before ship-out, burial or entombment? The possible consequences are not pleasant, so make sure the staff understands what questions they need to ask. Write them a script if you want to be sure they are all on the same page.

Once you start asking this question, you also will be helping the physician to understand the role they play in this process. That physician needs to understand that even though the immediate cause or mechanism of death might be pneumonia, more importantly, what contributed to that pneumonia? Was there some type of trauma? If you want to make your interactions with physicians a bit easier, tell them about the Vital Statistics online tutorial (<http://www.icattlearning.com/>) which explains their responsibilities, what they need to do as far as it relates to the medical examiner, how the disease conditions and circumstances of death should be noted on the death record. At the end of the day, your physician ends up helping you!

Florida Statutes support these directives. The medical examiner statute, section [406.12](#), requires anyone with knowledge of possible trauma to report that fact to the medical examiner. Florida Statutes, Section [382.006](#), the vital statistics statute, charges the funeral professional with the responsibility of obtaining the certifying physician's assurance that the death was from natural causes and there was no evidence of trauma or external cause of death. This assurance must be obtained prior to final disposition – you can't assume you have that approval and ship-out, bury or entomb the remains before receiving it.

Through technology, funeral professionals are working with the Bureau of Vital Statistics to improve the registration process as it relates to the physicians. Medical examiners are working with the Bureau of Vital Statistics and funeral professionals towards that same goal. Let's see if together, we can make this age-old issue into a non-issue.

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