

South African Guideline for Medical Certification of COVID-19 related deaths

Background

- The WHO has recently provided [international guidelines on the medical certification of cause of death due to COVID-19](#).¹ This indicates that COVID-19 should be recorded on the medical certificate of cause of death for ALL decedents where COVID-19 caused, or is assumed to have caused, or contributed to death.
- Until testing for SARS-CoV-2 is more accessible, mortality due to COVID-19 is the only population-based measure of the epidemic. For this reason, it is imperative that clinicians in South Africa are aware of their obligation under law² to report accurate causes of death on the South African death notification form. This means that clinicians are bound by law to report COVID-19 as a cause of death in cases where this has been confirmed, as well as in cases where, in their opinion this is the most probable cause of death, even if a test result is not available to confirm this.

Definition of a death due to COVID-19 (Based on WHO ICD-10)

- A death due to COVID-19 is defined for surveillance purposes as a death resulting from an illness which is compatible with COVID-19 (based on laboratory confirmation OR on clinical features only).
- The underlying cause of death of a person who has been diagnosed as suffering from COVID-19 (either on the basis of laboratory confirmation or on clinical grounds only) should be stated as COVID-19 (in Part 1 of the medical certificate of cause of death) unless a clear alternative or unrelated supervening medical cause of death (such as trauma or poisoning) is apparent.
- The death of a person in whom COVID-19 has been diagnosed (clinically or by laboratory confirmation) but who suffers from advanced pre-existing disease (such as severe cardiovascular disease or malignancy) should be carefully considered and clinical discretion used to determine the underlying cause of death. If the pre-existing condition / disease is then still considered to be the underlying cause of death, but COVID-19 may have played a significant role in the demise of the patient, both COVID-19 and the pre-existing condition should be clearly stated in the causal sequence leading to death (in Part 1 of the medical certificate)³. Where pre-existing conditions are controlled and/or in the background, report these in Part 2 of the medical certificate of cause of death and COVID-19 in Part 1 as the underlying cause of death.

¹ WHO, 2020. International guidelines for certification and classification of COVID-19 as a cause of death.

² Births and deaths Registration Act 51 of 1992.

³ This contradicts current WHO recommendations and reflects the difficulties of selecting a single underlying cause of death. However, this allows clinicians to use their discretion in cases with advanced pre-existing disease where COVID-19 plays more of a role as an immediate cause of death rather than underlying cause.

- COVID-19 should not be stated on the death certificate if there is a clear alternative cause of death, in which COVID-19 played no causal or contributory role (such as trauma or poisoning). COVID-19 should also not be stated as cause of death if there has been a period of complete recovery from the disease.

Case definition for COVID-19

Confirmed case:

A person with laboratory confirmation of SARS-CoV-2 infection (PCR), irrespective of clinical signs and symptoms.

Probable case or Covid PUI:

- Persons with acute respiratory illness with sudden onset of at least one of the following: cough, sore throat, shortness of breath, anosmia or dysguesia with or without fever (history or measured) and a clinical course compatible with COVID-19, with or without the presence of co-morbid conditions.
 - Pneumonia with bilateral patchy ground glass opacities on chest X-ray**AND/OR**
 - Acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS)

AND

- pending or inconclusive PCR result.

Suspected case

- Persons at high risk for COVID-19 who die outside a health facility or in ER with a history of acute respiratory illness with sudden onset of at least one of the following: cough, sore throat, shortness of breath or fever.

AND

- Recent history of
 - Close contact with COVID-19 case**OR**
 - Visit to health facility**OR**
 - Cluster outbreak (eg. residential institution, care home, workplace etc)

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