



# health

Department:  
Health  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Private Bag X828, PRETORIA, 0001, Civitas Building, cnr Thabo Sehume & Struben Street, Pretoria. Tel: 012 395 8000

**TO:  
HEADS OF PROVINCIAL HEALTH DEPARTMENTS  
HOSPITAL CEOs and CLINICAL MANAGERS  
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR DOCTORS**

## **MEDICAL CERTIFICATION OF DEATHS DUE TO COVID-19**

1. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recently provided international guidelines on the medical certification of cause of death due to Covid-19<sup>1</sup>. 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.
2. Mortality due to Covid-19 is an important population-based measure of the epidemic. When testing for SARS-CoV-2 is constrained, death information becomes even more important. For this reason, it is imperative that clinicians in South Africa are aware of their obligation under law<sup>2</sup> 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.
3. Definition of a death due to Covid-19 (Based on WHO ICD-10)
  - a. 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).
  - b. The underlying cause of death of a person who has been diagnosed with 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.
  - c. 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 contributing role

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

<sup>2</sup> Births and deaths Registration Act 51 of 1992.

in the demise of the patient, Covid-19 should ALSO be clearly stated in the causal sequence leading to death (in Part 1 of the medical certificate). Where pre-existing conditions are controlled and/or in the background, report these in Part 2 of the medical certificate of cause of death.

- d. 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.



**DR SSS BUTHELEZI**  
**DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF HEALTH**

**DATE:** 2020/07/21