



# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

*Department of Health*

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STATE HEALTH COMMISSIONER

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August 3, 2010

Dear Colleague,

Thank you for your continued devotion to promoting health for all Virginians. Today, I am contacting you about a very important clinical and public health issue- death certificate completion. The timely completion of a death certificate truly represents the last act of patient care. While physicians are responsible for completing the death certificate, I am also sending this communication to many other licensed healthcare providers so that the largest possible audience will understand the process.

Unfortunately, there are frequent delays occurring in this process across the Commonwealth causing real problems in many communities. For that reason, I am using this method of communication to address what is rapidly becoming an urgent public health issue. As many of you may know from personal experience with the death of a loved one, the death certificate serves many purposes for the survivors of the deceased. This permanent legal record of vital information including demographics and the cause and manner of death is required for the survivors to be able to bury or cremate their loved one, move their loved one's body out of state for final disposition, access and close bank accounts, probate a will, settle an estate and obtain proceeds from life insurance policies. The importance of the death certificate lies in the ability of the family to fulfill these necessary actions with ease during these difficult and challenging times. Without a signed death certificate families and funeral home personnel cannot finalize funeral plans.

In many cases delays in the processing of death certificates are the result of common misperceptions. For example, many physicians are hesitant to sign because of concerns that they may be sued for inaccurate statements of the cause of death. However, Virginia law clearly states that physicians are to determine and list the cause of death to the best of their ability. There has never been an instance in Virginia where a physician has been sued for the information listed in a death certificate.

I ask that you partner with me in taking action to close this gap in the understanding of the purpose and importance of this final act of patient care.

VDH has developed a number of resources and strategies in order to proactively address the various components of this issue. Please review the short PowerPoint presentation at the link below to refresh your memory on how to complete a death certificate in Virginia.

<https://covkc.agencies.virginia.gov/vdh/courses/Clinicians/deathcertificationcourse/player.html>

The training module will also be permanently available on the Department of Health Professions website and can be accessed by visiting <http://www.dhp.virginia.gov/> and clicking on the "Public Health Training for Healthcare Professionals" under the Services for Practitioners menu. I ask that you each take a few minutes to review this important information. In addition to the course, a job aid has been developed as a reference for death certificate completion and can both be found at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/clinicians/>. VDH will also work in conjunction with the funeral directors associations to create an information sheet that the directors can use as a tool to provide details of the death to the physician in charge of signing the death certificate.

I also realize it is important to educate physicians in training on this important patient care act and will ask the Deans of Virginia's Medical Schools to share this presentation with their students and residents.

Local health district directors in Virginia serve as your primary point of contact for questions about death certificate completion. Their contact information can be found at <http://www.vdh.state.va.us/lhd/>.

Thank you for joining me to make a difference in the lives of all Virginians faced with the loss of a loved one by taking the time to review the death certification process and carrying through on this important act of patient care.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Karen Remley".

Karen Remley, MD, MBA, FAAP  
Commissioner