

# **SPOKANE COUNTY MEDICAL EXAMINER'S OFFICE**

## **Statement of Policy, Procedure and Practice**

**Policy Title:**      **WHO CAN PRONOUNCE DEATH**  
                                 **WHO CAN SIGN DEATH CERTIFICATE**

### **Policy:**

No Medical Examiner staff member will "pronounce death." By definition, the Medical Examiner's Office is not notified until the pronouncement of death has occurred. In fact, there are no State laws which address who can properly perform the duty of "pronouncement of death." However, because the Medical Examiner's Office receives inquiries about this issue, it is addressed in this policy.

In comparison, there are State statutes which define who may certify the cause of death.

### **Procedures and Practices:**

#### **Pronouncement of Death:**

Washington State law does not define who may pronounce death. By convention, Emergency Medical Technicians, Paramedics, Physicians, Nurse Practitioners, Physician Assistants, and Registered Nurses pronounce death in Spokane County. When death occurs in a private residence, the Medical Examiner's Office should not be notified until such pronouncement has occurred. Even if there is involvement by a terminal health care agency, such as Hospice, and even if the death is expected, death must be formally pronounced before the Medical Examiner's Office becomes involved.

If the Medical Examiner's Office is called and death has not been formally pronounced, staff can suggest to the caller that Fire/EMTs be summoned via 911 or alternatively that the primary health care provider be called to make a formal pronouncement of death.

#### **Certification of Death:**

Washington State law does define which members of the community can sign the death certificate. The law allows Physicians, Physician Assistants, and Advanced Registered Nurse Practitioners to sign death certificates, if the attending health care provider. Physicians, per Health Department Policy, include Medical Doctors (MD's), Osteopathic Physicians (DO's), and Chiropractors. Naturopathic physicians cannot sign death certificates. Whenever the Medical Examiner's Office assumes jurisdiction, the Medical Examiner will assume responsibility for signing the death certificate.

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If the deceased died without medical attendance and the death is natural, the health officer may certify; otherwise, responsibility will be assumed by the Medical Examiner to certify the cause and manner of death.

Washington State law further requires that Physician Assistants, advanced Registered Nurse Practitioners, and Physicians complete a death certificate within a period of two days after it is presented to them, unless they can demonstrate good cause for not doing so.

**Reference:**

RCW 70.58.170

_____ Veena Singh, M.D. Chief Medical Examiner	_____ Date
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_____ Sean Ricciardo, M.D. Deputy Medical Examiner	_____ Date
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_____ Makinzie Mott, M.D. Deputy Medical Examiner	_____ Date
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_____ Reba Cherian, D.O. Deputy Medical Examiner	_____ Date
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**Implemented:** Mar 2003 **Revised** April 2008; April 2010; June 2012; Sept 2013; October 2015; December 2017; August 2019; January 2023

**Computer File Name:** Who can pronounce death who can sign a death certificate