

For the intern, the death certificate need not be worse than death itself

By: Daniel Oates, MD, Geriatrics Section

The death certificate can be one of the more intimidating experiences for the intern – one of those things they ‘don’t teach you in med school.’ It can sometimes be worse than an admission, when the administrator on call sits with you and says, “Oh for Pete’s sake, you need to WRITE out the month, not in put it in numbers...” Here are some helpful hints to make the experience minimally painful:

1. What is the cause of death?

- Cardiopulmonary arrest is synonymous with death as far as these certificates go. You should not put this as the primary cause of death, as it really describes the mode of death.
- You should put on the first line (a) “Immediate Cause” the condition that lead to the arrest, such as endocarditis, pneumonia or sepsis – probably what lead to the hospitalization
- The secondary diagnoses are some of the other more serious diagnoses which may have contributed to the “major diagnosis” which ultimately lead to the patient’s death.
- Other diseases which the patient had, but which may have been tangential to what lead to death can be listed in the blank space below (Part II – Number 30)

2. Certifying MD

- That is YOU (though it says “Attending”).
- Make sure you WRITE out the name of the month, not just in numbers.
- Pronouncement forms do not apply to the hospital. This form is for the community and nursing homes – when an RN or NP may be the one that does that actual pronouncement.
- The remainder of the form is completed by the decedent affairs office at BMC or by the Funeral Home.
- Make sure to print; do not use cursive. Use black ink.