

National Medical Examiner update

July 2020

Welcome

I continue to hear examples of medical examiners providing excellent support during the coronavirus emergency, and I am grateful to colleagues who have made such a valuable contribution. This seems to be generating even more enthusiasm for setting up medical examiner offices.

We have seen in recent days and weeks that local spikes in COVID-19 infections may require further response from medical examiners. However, as I asked in my previous update, in most areas medical examiners should now resume their normal duties. Any organisations that had paused the process of establishing their medical examiner offices, should also now restart this work.

You may also be aware that I was asked to arrange for medical examiners to scrutinise deaths of health service and social care workers from COVID-19 in England. This additional activity recognises the importance of medical examiners to the health service, and I have every confidence this process will be carried out professionally and sensitively, while further demonstrating the value of medical examiners to the NHS as a learning organisation.

In Wales they are exploring national endorsement of NHS guidance for such deaths, linking to Coroners and RIDDOR requirements.

Dr Alan Fletcher, National Medical Examiner

What's included in this update

- Scrutiny of staff COVID-19 deaths
- Quarterly reporting
- Cause of death list
- Medical examiner offices
- Implementation in Wales
- Training and events
- Contact details

Deaths of health service and social care workers in England from COVID-19

In May 2020, the Secretary of State [wrote to the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee](#) describing a process for investigating the deaths of healthcare and social care workers who died after contracting the coronavirus. The Department of Health and Social Care has also published [directions](#) to NHS trusts and foundation trusts to facilitate independent scrutiny of relevant deaths by medical examiners either from their own medical examiner office, or, if the patient was being cared for by a healthcare provider without a medical examiner, a medical examiner from another trust.

NHS England and NHS Improvement wrote to medical directors regarding the process on 7 July 2020. In most respects, the scrutiny will be identical to medical examiners' routine work, but will include retrospective cases, and a focus on whether there is reason to suspect COVID-19 was acquired in the course of employment.

When medical examiners suspect a health service or social care worker acquired coronavirus infection in the course of employment, NHS England and NHS Improvement will ensure the employer is aware of the staff fatality. This will enable the employer to consider if it has an obligation to notify the death to the Health and Safety Executive, in accordance with the Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 (RIDDOR). In cases where medical examiners find coroners have opened investigations, medical examiner scrutiny will end.

We are contacting affected trusts to provide information and guidance, with further support through regional medical examiners.

Quarterly reporting

We mentioned in the June update that we would expand activity and outcome reporting.

For NHS trusts and foundation trusts in England, this will be introduced with the quarter two reimbursement submission. This is due after the end of September and will cover activity for the period July 2020–September 2020. All acute trusts in England with medical examiner offices, or planning for their implementation, should have received details from regional medical examiners. Please email reporting.nme@nhs.net if you have questions, or if you have not received this information.

For Wales, there will be similar activity and outcome reporting, though Wales has its own reimbursement arrangements.

Cause of death list

The Royal College of Pathologists has published an updated [cause of death list](#) which offers guidance for those completing death certificates and those registering deaths. This replaces the 2016 document issued to registrars by the General Register Office, but retains the same name and format. The cause of death list details many conditions that may be included on the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD). It is not intended to be an exhaustive list of all possible causes of death, but addresses conditions that have previously prompted discussion between certifying doctors, registrars and coroners, and provides consistent guidance for all stakeholders. The college will be responsible for updating the content and welcomes feedback to CODlist@rcpath.org

Implementation in Wales

The implementation programme in Wales will deliver a single medical examiner service via four regions (North Wales, Mid and West Wales, South Wales Central and South East Wales) each scrutinising between 5,500 and 9,000 deaths per year. Hub offices will be established in each of the four regions by the end of October 2020, ensuring all seven health board areas are covered. Hub offices will each have one WTE medical examiner, supported by three medical examiner officers and a senior medical examiner officer in the first instance, and additional recruitment will then bring staffing in each region up to the model of one medical examiner and three medical examiner officers per 3,000 deaths. Recruitment should be complete by February 2021, so that a full service, covering both acute and community deaths, is operational from April 2021.

Recruitment has already taken place in the Mid and West Wales region and the regional office will be operational from the end of July 2020. North Wales will follow in August, South Wales Central in September and South East Wales in October.

Establishment of the regional offices was changed to reflect the coronavirus emergency, and the need to work differently and maintain social distancing. Space is at even more of a premium than before on hospital sites, but we are fortunate that we have been able to identify suitable alternative solutions off site. NHS Shared Services Partnership will be working directly with staff to ensure they feel safe and confident in their working environment.

Medical examiner offices – practical requirements

You have been asking about accommodation for medical examiners and medical examiner officers. We cannot prescribe requirements, and each host organisation will have its own arrangements and context. However, there are some principles we suggest medical examiner offices should attempt to follow:

- Facilities for storing data and information securely (electronic and/or paper)
- Suitable environment for discussing sensitive information
- Adequate office accommodation and IT equipment (including facilities for remote working)
- Suitably located to facilitate interaction with bereavement services.

Each host organisation needs to ensure that the office adheres to COVID-19 social distancing measures and that a safe working environment is available to staff.

Training and events

Regional network events

Regional medical examiners have started scheduling regional network events for medical examiners in England. Please keep in touch with your regional medical examiner officers, or lead medical examiner officer in Wales, for details about network events.

Royal College of Pathologists training

The next medical examiner training day on 30 July 2020, and the medical examiner officer training event on 16 September 2020 will both be delivered by Zoom as interactive

video events. Further details can be found on the [Royal College of Pathologists' website](#). The College recently published 36 new non-core e-learning modules with a further 25 in development.

Contact details

We encourage you to continue to raise queries with us and share your thoughts on the introduction of medical examiners, through the [contacts list](#).

The page contains contact details for the national medical examiner's office, the medical examiner team in Wales, and regional medical examiner contacts in England.

Further information

Further information about the programme, including previous editions of this bulletin, can be found on the [national medical examiner](#) webpage.

NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership also has a web page for the [medical examiner system in Wales](#).

© NHS Improvement July 2020