

Instructions for Physicians for Death Certificates: Compliance with the Death with Dignity Act of 2016

The Death with Dignity Act (“Act”), (D.C. Law 21-182; D.C. Official Code § 7-661.01), states that “...the patient’s death certificate...shall list the underlying terminal disease as the cause of death.” The act also states that, “Actions taken in accordance with this act do not constitute suicide, assisted suicide, mercy killing, or homicide.”

If you know the decedent used the Act, you must comply with the strict requirements of the law when completing the death record:

1. The underlying terminal disease must be listed as the cause of death.
2. The manner of death must be marked as “Natural.”
3. The cause of death section may not contain any language that indicates that the Act was used, such as:
 - a. Suicide
 - b. Assisted suicide
 - c. PAS (Physician-assisted suicide)
 - d. DWD (Death with Dignity)
 - e. Mercy killing
 - f. Homicide
 - g. Euthanasia
 - h. MAID (medical assistance in dying OR medically assisted dying)
 - i. Legally Prescribed/Legal Prescription
 - j. Physician-assisted dying
 - k. Any reference to medications covered by this legislation
 - l. Also any reference to the Act, applicable as of June 6, 2017.

The Department of Health or Office of the Chief Medical Examiner will reject any death certificate that does not properly adhere to the requirements of the Act.¹ If a death certificate contains any reference to actions that might indicate use of the Act, the medical certifier will be instructed to submit a correction within 24 hours of notification and before a permit to proceed with disposition will be issued.

Email the Vital Records Division at vital.helpdesk@dc.gov for guidance on how to proceed if you have any questions regarding compliance with cause of death reporting under the Death with Dignity Act.

¹ Under District law, the Registrar of the Department of Health Vital Records Division has the authority to develop and distribute forms or other means of transmitting data to carry out its purposes. The Registrar also has authority to require information needed to complete a vital record, including death records.