



Questions From a Death Certificate

Introduction

by Daniel J. Bressler, MD

BY MY BEST ESTIMATE, I've filled out between 100 and 200 death certificates during my career. Usually the sad task is completed hurriedly and somewhat perfunctorily; it is a final bureaucratic chore that is as legally necessary as it is anticlimactic. The timeframe to complete one is typically 24 hours from the time of death.

What if the act of completing a death certificate were an opportunity to reflect deeply about the person now gone, the rich details that adhere to a whole lived life, not just the cold, clinical details of the final days or weeks? What if the questions of the death certificate created an invitation to remember and to imagine?

Questions From a Death Certificate

- What was the decedent's name?*
- What was his date of birth?*
- What level of education did he complete?*
- What was he always curious about?*
- What was the exact moment of his death?*
- Where did he die?*
- Is that where he wanted to die?*
- What were his final words or wishes?*
- Was his death natural, accidental, or a result of homicide or suicide?*
- Did his job kill him?*
- Did he ever lose his desire to live?*
- Did he have any premonitions that his death was imminent?*
- What were the three main diseases he died from?*
- What kept him alive?*
- What other conditions did he have?*
- What conditions was he most afraid of?*
- Was it just his time to go?*
- Did he have an operation for any of the conditions listed above?*
- How long have you known the decedent?*
- What was your first impression of him?*
- How did you feel when you saw his name on your office schedule?*
- What did you learn from the decedent?*
- If you were not his doctor, would you have been his friend?*
- What do you wish you had said to him before he died?*
- Could you have done more to save him?*
- Has this death been reported to the coroner?*
- Has an autopsy been performed?*
- What will you miss most about him?*
- If he were to be reincarnated as an animal, what kind would it be?*
- Is he survived by a spouse or children?*
- Who will remember him one hundred years from now?*

Here is one version of such a certificate. I have interspersed questions from the actual California certified document with questions of my own invention. You may find that many are relevant to both the living as well as the dead. **SDP**

Dr. Bressler, SDCMS-CMA member since 1988, is chair of the Biomedical Ethics Committee at Scripps Mercy Hospital and longtime contributing writer to San Diego Physician.