

Gateway Reference: 16564

To: Directors of Public Health

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Regional Directors of Public Health  
President, Association of Directors of Public Health  
President, Faculty of Public Health

26th August 2011

Dear Colleague

### **Improving the Process of Death Certification**

I am writing to update you on the national reforms to death certification. This is an important programme for Directors of Public Health both because of the central role of death data to our work but also because of new plans to base the medical examiner function in Local Government.

The Health and Social Care Bill includes an important amendment to the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 transferring responsibility for the appointment of medical examiners and related activities from Primary Care Trusts to Local Authorities. The Listening Exercise has therefore resulted in a change to the timetable for the death certification reforms. The relevant regulations are now expected to be published for consultation in October and, subject to the Bill's Parliamentary passage, will be laid in Parliament in May / June 2012 with a commencement date of April 2013. The extended period between introduction and commencement is intended to provide time for local authorities to establish a local medical examiner's service for their area.

I attach for your information an update from the Death Certification Programme that is also being sent to local authority chief executives. I hope you find the briefing helpful. There are two additional points of process that I would like to draw to your attention:

1. The Programme Team has recently started working with a group of local authority managers responsible for registration / coroner services to develop alternative service models for local medical examiner services and to clarify associated costs and other issues. These managers, from Cambridgeshire, Gloucestershire, Hampshire, Kent, Lancashire, Southwark, Lincolnshire, Oxfordshire and Solihull, were either nominated by the Local Government Group or offered to work with the Programme as an adjunct to their role as regional representatives on the Local Registration Services National Panel. It would be very helpful if DPHs in these areas could directly support this work if not already doing so.
2. It is anticipated that each local authority will need to nominate a director or senior manager to lead work required plan and prepare for implementation of their local medical examiner's service

and, potentially, to be the Accountable Officer for the service once it has been established. The Programme Team has suggested that it would be helpful if the lead person:

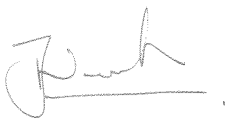
- Has working knowledge of and / or close links with the local authority's registration and coroner services or public health function; and
- Is nominated by December 2011 so that s/he can be briefed following the public consultation and is able to make a rapid start once the regulations have been introduced.

The medical examiner service is expected to improve the quality of mortality data. I am pleased to report that this expectation is broadly supported by initial analyses carried out by the Office of National Statistics. While these analyses remain preliminary, they will be helpful in guiding any definitive comparative work on the certified causes of the 350,000 - 400,000 deaths that will be scrutinised by medical examiners during the first year after the new process has been introduced.

The anticipated improvement in the quality of mortality data is a key component of the benefits case for the reforms. As key users of mortality data, the Programme Team would welcome your feedback on how you might assess and quantify the value of improved quality data – for example in the preparation or impact of the local Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA) (and joint health and wellbeing strategy (JHWS) if this is already being undertaken by the shadow health and wellbeing board locally). If you are able to provide this feedback to [paulader@nhs.net](mailto:paulader@nhs.net) please do so by the end of September. I am also pleased to report that Dr Julia Verne Director of the South West Public Health Observatory has agreed to join the Steering Group and to advise the programme along with other colleagues in the PHO network.

These reforms have been a long time in preparation but are now entering an exciting phase of implementation. The support of Directors of Public Health at local level will be crucial to their success. If you would like any further briefing or wish to discuss any aspect of this letter or the attached update, please do let me or the Programme Team know. We will be happy to respond.

Yours sincerely



**Professor John Newton**  
Lead RDPH on Death Certification Reforms  
(Regional Director for Public Health – NHS South Central)