

PROJECT ECHO: OD-FIT

Overdose Fatality Investigation Techniques

Significant and Contributory Factors in Drug-Related Fatalities

The intersection between drug use and natural pathology is one of the most difficult aspects of completing a death certificate for many drug-related fatalities. As individuals age, more and more “natural” disease processes may be present in addition to potentially fatal concentrations of various drugs. One of the best ways to discern if the drugs or the natural disease is the cause of death is to perform a full autopsy in deaths by apparent intoxication from drugs, alcohol, or poison. When there is evidence from the autopsy that a disease or health condition made someone more vulnerable to a drug’s toxicity, listing the pre-existing or coexisting condition in Part II of the death certificate is appropriate. In addition to a complete autopsy, the history in these cases can be helpful when trying to discern if a death is due to drugs, natural pathology, or a combination of both.

Relevant Terminology

- **Cause of death (COD):** An injury or disease which, in a natural, unbroken sequence uninterrupted by an efficient intervening cause, produces death and in whose absence death would not have occurred.
- **Death certificate (DC):** A permanent document registered with the vital records office that states the identification, fact of death, cause of death, and manner of death. A DC is also a source of mortality statistics.
- **Manner of death (MOD):** A classification system based on the circumstances under which death occurred; usually consists of an accident, homicide, natural, suicide, or undetermined. These manners are then used for public health and vital statistics purposes.
- **Part 1:** The primary cause(s) of death on the death certificate.
- **Part 2:** This is the proper location for a certifier to list “other significant conditions” on the death certificate. For death certification, Part II of the death certificate should not contain any pre-existing or coexisting disease or injury that contributed to death but DID NOT result in the underlying cause of death.

Key Takeaways

- For most drug-related fatalities, listing information in Part 2 is not necessary. If a person dies with a lethal concentration of multiple drugs in their blood, listing pre-existing conditions found at autopsy is not necessary. Furthermore, Part 2 of a death certificate is not a list of a decedent’s entire past medical history. The items listed in Part 2 should be items that are related to the cause of death listed in Part 1.
- For drug-related fatalities, Part 2 of the death certificate should not list items in the chain of events that stemmed from a drug’s toxicity. For example, listing “acute bronchopneumonia” in Part 2 on a death certificate where the cause of death is “fentanyl toxicity” is not necessary as the respiratory depression from the drug caused the pneumonia observed at autopsy. However,

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listing “chronic obstructive pulmonary disease” in Part 2 on a death certificate where death was due to “fentanyl toxicity” is appropriate as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease was a pre-existing condition that did make the decedent more prone to a drug’s toxicity from a respiratory depressant.

To learn more about significant and contributory factors in drug-related fatalities, check out the [session recording](#) and [slides](#) or email odfitecho@astho.org for more information.

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