



By email:

Date: 27 March 2020

Dear Doctor,

Re: COVID-19 Planning

Emergency Legislation re Medical Certificate of Cause of Death and Coroners

The current COVID-19 pandemic has created an upsurge in work for healthcare professionals across Northern Ireland. We expect a rise in virus related deaths both in hospitals and in the community. However, deaths which are considered to be due to the Coronavirus are considered "**Natural**" and do **NOT** need to be reported to the Coroner.

Additional powers under the Coronavirus Bill provide more flexibility for a medical practitioner to sign a Medical Cause of Death Certificate, (MCCD). The Bill provides that, for deaths which occur from a natural illness, where the individual was treated by a registered medical practitioner in the past 28 days and that practitioner is unable to sign the certificate, then ***another*** medical practitioner may sign the certificate (MCCD), where they can state, to the best of their knowledge and belief, the cause of death.

Additionally, where an a death occurs from a natural illness and the person was ***not*** treated by a registered medical practitioner within the past 28 days, then ***any*** registered medical practitioner may sign the MCCD if they can state, to the best of their knowledge and belief, the cause of death. Further detailed guidance will be offered by the Department of Health.

There is huge pressure on the small number of pathologists who provide Post Mortem services in Northern Ireland. Problems caused by the current restrictions have already resulted in decreased numbers of PMs being carried out daily, and a subsequent delay in releasing remains. This, as you will appreciate, can be distressing to families, and further delays are anticipated.

Consequently, doctors are asked to carefully consider whether a report to the Coroner is necessary. If it is felt that the Coroner should be advised of the death, and the death is clearly as a result of natural causes, doctors should consider if they can assist the State Pathology Department by being prepared to issue a Pro Forma Letter with the cause of death based on the balance of probabilities, with knowledge of the deceased's medical history and co-morbidities, and circumstances of death.

Unnatural and suspicious deaths will be subject to the usual investigative processes of the Coroner's Service.

Yours Sincerely,

Helen Murray

CSNI Officer Manager