

London Coroners

15 April 2020

Dear Colleagues,

I write with reference to your letter dated 14th April regarding verification of death.

I would reflect to you that the publication of your opinion on this matter, without understanding its wider healthcare ramifications, has generated considerable consternation among hard working GPs and their staff at a time when we are making every effort to provide a safe service to the seriously sick and critically ill.

We are in agreement with your statement that there is no legal requirement for any specified individual to verify death. However, you then go on to quote professional guidance from nursing, ambulance and police services to support your later assertions. It is disappointing that you choose to ignore guidance from the bodies representing those who have traditionally dealt with the verification of death. Had you taken such expert advice then your conclusion would, I am sure, have been different.

The British Medical Association is acutely aware of the need to balance many competing imperatives at this difficult time. We face the greatest challenge to the nation's health for a century, and this battle will be won or lost in the community. If our community services, led by GPs, fail then the limited capacity of our hospitals will be flooded and quickly overwhelmed. This will result in excess deaths and is the reason why the entire nation has applied itself to the lockdown process in support of our health front line. Our workforce is severely limited, hence the need for government to bring back into harness thousands of retired doctors. These are extraordinary measures for extraordinary times and should drive home the severe anxiety that we in community healthcare feel regarding our ability to cope with the approaching wave of infection.

On this background it is disappointing in the extreme that as a group you would choose to take such a stance that is not consistent with the legal position and will divert doctors away from treating the sick. Now is the time to support our front line. Within the limited capacity available to us, we need our doctors to be preventing death, not verifying it.

Chief executive officer: Tom Grinyer

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As an Association we are working with the Royal College of General Practitioners to produce a protocol for the verification of expected death with the remote assistance of other health and care workers who may feel able to support doctors in this way via video link. This is a proportionate compromise that balances the needs of the living with the needs of the deceased and their families in a manner that will speed up the process while allowing doctors to continue on the front line. This builds on work that we have been doing with NHS England, CQC and others. Your position puts at jeopardy all of that hard and vital work.

At this time of national crisis, we must all play our part. That includes the coronial system. The letter you have circulated nationally risks needlessly tying up desperately needed staff and therefore puts lives at risk. The position you have taken is also at variance from many other coroners who have set out much more appropriate arrangements which has the support of healthcare professionals in those areas. I am therefore circulating this response to LMCs across England so they may use it to initiate a conversation with coroners up and down the country. I call upon you to reflect on my observations and revise your position. Without such a revision I fear that your position will be the indirect cause of excess deaths.

Yours,



Dr. Mark Sanford-Wood
Deputy Chair BMA GP Committee
BMA lead on community deaths