

What do you do when somebody dies?

This Charter sets out many details about death and funerals, as individual topics. As it may be difficult for those with no experience of a death to understand how everything interrelates, this section describes what occurs in the period before a funeral.

Death at home

When a person dies at home, the next of kin or executor and the family doctor should be informed. The doctor who cared for the person during the last illness will complete a free Certificate of the Cause of Death (called the "death certificate" hereafter). If cremation is intended, this doctor will complete cremation Form B and will arrange for another doctor to complete the confirmatory Form C. The second doctor will need to view the body at some stage. These forms are provided free of charge from the administration office of the crematorium. The two doctors completing these forms will require payment for their completing with this cost being included in your Funeral Directors account. If you are arranging the funeral without the use of a Funeral Director you will be required to pay these charges directly. These forms are not required if the death is taken over by the Coroner "(see "Coroner" below).

The death certificate must be taken to the Registrar of Births and Deaths for the District in which the death occurred within five days. (At the time of writing, a review of the registration service was underway. It might transpire that a more flexible approach is taken to death registration in the future and your Charter member will be able to advise of any changes). In Scotland, you can visit any Registrar of Births and Deaths within eight days. Ensure you visit the correct office and check opening times, as they may operate limited hours. The doctor may send the death certificate direct to the Registrar, and not give it to you to take.

Death in hospital

If someone dies in hospital, the death certificate will be issued there. The next of kin may be requested to authorise a post-mortem. If cremation is intended, the hospital will arrange the necessary documentation.

The deceased will be transferred to a mortuary. Arrangements to deliver the death certificate to the Registrar of Births and Deaths and to register the death are as above, under "Death at Home". The Registrar will be the one covering the Hospital area, which may be different to the home address of the deceased.

If the death occurs in a residential or nursing home, they may follow a similar routine as for that in hospital. In addition, they may have an arrangement with a Funeral Director for the removal of the body to a mortuary or a Chapel of Rest. This Funeral Director does not necessarily have to undertake the funeral for you. You may select any Funeral Director, or you can organise the funeral yourself.

Coroner

(Note: In Scotland the Procurator Fiscal has jurisdiction over the body of a person who has died unexpectedly. Throughout this Charter any reference to the Coroner will relate to the Procurator Fiscal in Scotland)

If the death was sudden or due to an accident, or no doctor had attended for some time, the Coroner must be informed. On some occasions the Registrar of Births and Deaths may also report the death to the Coroner. The Coroner will decide whether to hold a post-mortem and/or an inquest. As most cases are found to be due to natural causes, inquests are rarely required. The Coroner will then notify the Registrar that the death can be registered. The person registering the death will need to visit the Registrar to do this. The Coroner's Office will keep this person informed about what to do. As these arrangements may cause delay, you should not arrange the funeral until authorised by the Coroner's Officer. The Coroner will issue an Order for Burial (white certificate) or for Cremation (yellow certificate) without charge. The certificate should be given to your Funeral Director or sent to the cemetery or crematorium as soon as possible.

Again, you may select any Funeral Director, or you can organise the funeral yourself.

Registrar of Births and Deaths

The Registrar can register the death only if he/she is given or has obtained the death certificate or has received notification from the Coroner. He or she will need to know the following details about the deceased:

1. FULL NAME – including any other names by which they were known.
2. MAIDEN SURNAME – if the deceased is a married woman.
3. DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH
4. OCCUPATION – and their husband's full name and occupation, if the deceased is a married woman or a widow.

You will need to confirm the date and place of death. Other questions will be asked about the date of birth of the surviving spouse and information about the state pensions and allowances the person was receiving, including war pensions. The NHS number will be requested and the medical card of the deceased should be surrendered to the Registrar, if it is available. If the number is not known, and the medical card is unavailable, you can still register the death.

The Registrar will issue a free social security form to ensure that benefits are being paid correctly. If the Coroner is not issuing an Order for Burial or Cremation, the Registrar will issue a free certificate for this purpose. This should be given to your Funeral Director or sent to the cemetery or crematorium as soon as possible.

The Registrar will advise you over any further certificate copies you require and the cost involved. These will be for obtaining Grant of Probate or Letter of Administration, to show banks, social security or building societies, and to claim insurance.

The Deceased

While the above procedures are taking place, it is essential that the deceased is cared for. With death at home, if you are using a Funeral Director, he or she should be called as soon as possible. They will remove the deceased and complete laying-out and possibly embalming. The deceased may remain at their Chapel of Rest or may be returned home, should you so wish. If the death was in hospital, the staff usually complete laying-out and your Funeral Director will collect the deceased and carry out your instructions.

If you are not using a Funeral Director, and the death occurs at home, you may complete laying-out, or have this done by a district nurse or some other person. The deceased can remain at home and must be kept as cool as possible. For obvious reasons it is necessary to make arrangements for the burial or cremation to take place as soon as is possible as in some cases deterioration of the body may become rapid with the obvious consequences occurring. Your local mortuary, cemetery or crematorium may have facilities to hold the deceased pending the funeral. If the death was in hospital, the deceased will be taken to the hospital mortuary. You can collect the deceased yourself, provided you have a coffin and suitable transport. You can keep the deceased at home, or you may be able to use the mortuary until the day of the funeral.

These arrangements are not mandatory and can be varied in accordance with ethnic or other needs.

Death Abroad

Refer to your Charter member for further advice.

Conclusion

It is assumed that whoever arranges the funeral is aware of the wishes of the deceased, whether a will exists and who the executor(s) is. It is important to note that executors have the right to choose burial or cremation, whether it accords with the wishes of the deceased or not. If there is no will, and therefore no executors, someone (usually the next of kin) will make these decisions. With a greater number of people taking out funeral plans and insurance, it is important to check whether the deceased subscribed to a scheme or policy. The personal effects of the deceased should be checked to see if Rights to a family grave already exist.

The Charter sections on "BURIAL PROCEDURE" and "CREMATION PROCEDURE" will describe what happens next, as the arrangements for either type of funeral proceeds. The remaining sections of the Charter enlarge upon specific topics, to enable you to consider all the issues involved with a funeral.