

Death Certification & Medical Examiner Update—April 2017

Paul Allcock and Terry Tennens have spoken with the newly recruited civil servants managing the Medical Examiner and death certificate reforms set to affect England and Wales. Jeremy Mean is the new Deputy Director, with a new team consisting of Jane Crossley, Rumku Basu-Owen and Maxine Siddon.

SAIF now understands the April 2018 implementation date will not be met, as budgets for the NHS are set in advance and ministers require more time.

Why are Medical Examiners being introduced?

- Death certification process almost unchanged since 1935
- Shipman case exposed the system as confusing and having inadequate safeguards against wrongdoing
- Francis Inquiry into Mid Staffordshire made recommendations about accuracy of cause of death and better interface with bereaved families

Purpose of Medical Examiners:

- New, independent role in death certification process – transparency for families
- Scrutiny of the cause of death in every non-coronial death
- Identification of cases of unexplained death requiring referral to the coroner
- Agree cause of death before the certifying doctor issues medical certificate of cause of death to the family for registration – quality and accuracy
- Link to mortality reviews; governance systems for quality improvement and to wider public health

Who can be a medical examiner?

- Registered medical practitioners with clinical practice in past five years
- Sufficient knowledge and seniority to command respect of medical colleagues and senior coroners
- Good working knowledge of a broad range of medical and surgical healthcare
- Expected that medical examiners would work on a part-time basis to provide two or three sessions a week alongside their existing work

Difference between England and Wales:

- In Wales this is devolved to the local health boards and the Welsh Government can set its own fee. It has been indicated that there will be one fee in Wales that will be the same as England – £98.50

was mooted as a figure. (There will be no cremation fee once the medical examiner system is in place)

- The Welsh Government has indicated a joint committee of local health boards for the oversight of the implementation plan
- In England, local health authorities will be responsible, but there will be a single system of medical examiners implemented

Expected benefits:

- Increased transparency for bereaved families
- Improved quality and accuracy of medical certificates of cause of death
- Scrutiny of all deaths that do not require a coroner's post-mortem or inquest, providing consistency
- Ability to report matters of clinical governance to support local learning and changes to practice and procedures
- Provision of information to support public health surveillance