

Purpose of this guidance

The purpose of this guidance is to ensure that NHS Lothian continues to provide safe, effective, high quality, dignified care for patients who die and families who are bereaved during the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance provides clarification on important aspects of care and processes after death in the context of the pandemic COVID-19 emergency. Parts of the guidance relate specifically to care of patients who are confirmed or suspected to have COVID-19 however it also covers deaths from any condition where processes have changed as a result of the pandemic. It addresses frequently asked questions regarding infection prevention and control requirements during personal care after death (last offices), procedural arrangements (e.g. for confirmation of death, reporting to the procurator fiscal, death certification and registration) and restrictions that may be in place (e.g. on visiting and viewing).

1. Support for the family

For all deaths

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in all normal hospital / care setting visiting being suspended except in exceptional circumstances. Visiting a patient who is dying is classed as an exception and should be facilitated appropriately using PPE to minimise the risk to the visitor. Staff should consult NHS Lothian guidance on [Connecting Patients Families, Carers and Friends during Illness and at the End of Life throughout COVID-19](#) and [Infection Prevention and Control advice to support visiting patients at the end of life during COVID-19 Pandemic](#).

Hospital chaplains continue to provide support for anyone who may be distressed or in need of spiritual care, including patients, families and staff. Contact details can be found in the [Spiritual Care](#) section of the staff intranet.

After death, the bereaved family should be provided with information about what to do following a death, and sources of bereavement support. Where the family is present at time of death, the *When Someone Has Died* bereavement information pack should be given along with the supplementary leaflet on *Registering a death in Edinburgh and the Lothians During the COVID-19 Pandemic* (or *Rainbow Pack* equivalents in Children's Services). These can be ordered from the NHS Lothian Bereavement Service.

If the family is not present at the time of death to receive a hard copy of this information, then it should be provided in the way that best meets their needs and capabilities (e.g. digital access and literacy): either a hard copy sent by post or the family advised of how to access the information on the [Bereavement Service](#) section of the NHS Lothian website.

2. Confirmation of death

For all deaths

An appropriately trained registered healthcare professional can confirm death as per NHS Lothian [Confirmation of Death Policy](#) and [Confirmation of Death Procedure](#).

3. Reporting deaths to the Procurator Fiscal

For confirmed /suspected COVID-19 deaths

Although COVID-19 was initially made a notifiable disease, an exception has been made that a death involving COVID-19 does not require to be discussed with the Procurator Fiscal if this is the sole reason for reporting it. This suspension will be reviewed at the end of July 2020 and may be extended.

However, deaths from COVID-19 or suspected COVID-19 **must be reported** to the Procurator Fiscal (a) where the deceased was resident in a care home when the virus was contracted or (b) where there are reasonable grounds to suspect that the deceased contracted the virus in the course of their employment or (c) where there is a non COVID-19 related indication to report the death to the Procurator Fiscal.

For all deaths

If there is a non-COVID-19 related indication to report the death to the Procurator Fiscal, you must do so as outlined in NHS Lothian's Death in Hospital Procedure on [Reporting deaths to the Procurator Fiscal](#). Reports by email **must** be made from an nhs.net account (@nhslothian to COPFS is not a safe email transmission route).

4. Completion and issue of the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death & review process

The Interim Chief Medical Officer (ICMO) has issued [Updated Guidance to Medical Practitioners for Death Certification during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#) to support accurate completion and timely provision of Medical Certificates of Cause of Death (MCCDs) during this challenging time.

For confirmed / suspected COVID-19 deaths

Further to the ICMO's letter, the Death Certification Review Service (DCRS) has produced [Guidance for doctors completing MCCDs for confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19 in Scotland](#). It advises that in such cases:

- Acceptable terminology for describing the cause of death in Part C is *COVID-19 disease* or *SARS-CoV-2 infection*.

- If the disease is suspected but not confirmed, you may write *Presumed COVID-19 disease*.
- Tick YES to the DH1 hazard box, as COVID-19 is a notifiable disease.
- Due to the suspension on the requirement to report COVID-19 deaths to the Procurator Fiscal, unless for specific reasons, the PF box should be left blank.
- Tick the extra information box if you have outstanding results (for example, virology) which may change the MCCD at a later date. Otherwise, leave this box blank.
- DCRS can provide further information and advice: contact on 0300 123 1898 or dcrs@nhs24.scot.nhs.uk

For all deaths

The [ICMO's letter](#) also outlines the expectation that certifying doctors will stop face-to-face contact and the handing over of a paper MCCD and the certificate should instead be sent by email to the registrar, as well as to the next of kin in specific circumstances (see below). [Supplementary guidance](#) from the Scottish Government outlines the process to be followed for electronic transfer of the MCCD. [NHS Lothian Guidance for Completion and Issuing of Medical Certificate of Cause of Death and Bereavement Information for Deaths during COVID-19 \[v4\]](#) sets out the local processes to be followed:

- The Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD) is not given to or collected by next of kin.
- The MCCD is scanned by mortuary staff / designated staff (at sites without staffed mortuaries) and emailed to the Registration Office along with a Death Registration Form containing family / NOK details. This email must be cc'd to the NHS Lothian Bereavement Service.
- The original MCCD is posted to Registration Office.
- The Bereavement Service can email a copy of the MCCD to the family / NOK if they consent to receive this by non-secure email, however they must email the Bereavement Service to request this (this is an information governance requirement).
- Bereavement information including a supplementary When Someone Has Died / Rainbow Pack leaflet containing guidance on current registration arrangements should be given, emailed or posted to the family.

The random review of MCCDs by the Death Certification Review Service was suspended on 26 March 2020 but reinstated at 4% level 1 reviews on 11 May 2020 and will remain under review throughout the pandemic period.

5. Infection control notification

For confirmed / suspected COVID-19 deaths

For patients with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 the [Deceased Inpatient Notification Form](#) should be completed indicating that there is a risk of infection via 'DROPLET' and 'CONTACT – BODY FLUIDS' transmission routes but no further precautions marked (unless other infection present – see below).

For all deaths

The [Deceased Inpatient Notification Form](#) must be completed. For other infections or co-infections, see Section 2.5 and Appendix 12 of the [National Infection Prevention and Control Manual](#). NB.

Appendix 12 refers to other coronaviruses (SARS/MERS) but the advice for SARS-CoV-2 is different (as above).

6. Personal care after death (last offices)

For confirmed / suspected COVID-19 deaths

In relation to care of a deceased person with confirmed or suspected COVID-19, national guidance¹ on [Reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the hospital setting](#) states that:

*'The principles of SICPs and TBPs continue to apply whilst deceased individuals remain in the care environment. This is due to the ongoing risk of infectious transmission via contact although the risk is usually lower than for living patients. Where the deceased was known or possibly infected with COVID-19, there is no requirement for a body bag, and viewing, hygienic preparations, post-mortem and embalming are all permitted.'*²

Staff carrying out personal care after death should wear appropriate PPE. Although not necessary for infection prevention and control, it remains a requirement of the NHS Lothian Death in Hospital Procedure that a single body bag should be used (where available) to wrap the deceased person for dignified transfer to the mortuary / funeral director. In the event that body bags are not available via Procurement, alternative resources will be provided to shroud the deceased. A supply of plastic body envelopes is available however these are not zipped, therefore the opening must be carefully rolled and securely taped. In the event that neither body bags nor body envelopes are available, large waterproof surgical drapes can be used and must also be securely taped after wrapping the deceased person.

For all deaths

For general guidance, staff should refer to the NHS Lothian Death in Hospital Procedure on [Personal care after death \(Last Offices\)](#).

7. Transfer of deceased person from ward to care of mortuary

For confirmed / suspected COVID-19 deaths in Intensive Care

In line with current UK guidance, all staff entering a COVID-19 cohort in Intensive Care require to wear a face fit tested respirator mask (FFP3). Porter staff are not currently face fit tested, and are not a high risk group who require this level of protection at work in relation to their role. Therefore porters should not enter COVID-19 Intensive Care or ITU cohort areas in order to transfer a deceased patient to the mortuary. Instead, they should deliver the concealment trolley to the ITU doors where it will be collected by staff. Ward staff in appropriate PPE will transfer the deceased person to the trolley before returning to the porters for transfer to the mortuary. At the mortuary, porters would require to wear standard PPE (gloves and aprons) as per normal practice, as there is no risk of droplet transmission once the deceased is appropriately shrouded in a body bag or water repellent cover.

For all deaths

¹ Hosted by Public Health England but developed and adopted by the four UK countries.

² PHE [Reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the hospital setting](#)

General guidance can be found in the NHS Lothian Death in Hospital Procedure on [Transfer of deceased person to from ward to care of mortuary / funeral director](#).

8. Returning deceased person's property to family

For confirmed / suspected COVID-19 deaths

The belongings of a deceased person with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 should be handled with care but can be returned to families as per NHS Lothian Death in Hospital Procedure for [Returning Deceased Person's Property to Family / Next of Kin](#), bearing in mind the additional advice below.

- Items that can be safely wiped down should be cleaned with, for example, Chlorclean.³
- Items that are soiled with body fluids should be disposed of with next of kin's consent.
- Laundry etc should not be shaken out to minimise possibility of dispersing the virus.
- Washable items (clothing etc) which are to be returned to the next of kin should be placed in a water-soluble/alginate bag and then inside a polythene bag and secured. Families should be advised not to remove from the outer bag until at least 72 hours after last contact with the deceased person. After 72 hours, the alginate bag and contents can be washed normally.⁴
- Non-washable items such as mementoes and keepsakes should be placed into a sealed bag which families are advised not to open for at least 72 hours.⁵

For all deaths

If the next of kin are unable to collect belongings from the ward e.g. if symptomatic, self-isolating or shielded, then permission should be sought to dispose of clothes, toiletries and any perishables. Valuables can be deposited with cashiers using **NHSL Patient's Cash & Valuables** book using plastic "Smartsafe bags" which are wipeable, sealable and tamper proof. They come in boxes of 25 and can be requested by emailing the CashOffice.RIE@nhslothian.scot.nhs.uk,

Ward staff also need to complete a [Notification of Discharge/Death](#) form with accurate next of kin details. This will enable cashiers to liaise with NOK and arrange the return of any valuables. NOK can come into cashiers later to collect them or if needed cashiers can arrange for the valuables to be couriered to NOK.

9. Bereavement Suite Viewing

For all deaths

Viewing is permitted but must be consistent with hospital visiting policy and conducted in line with guidance on social distancing. Viewings must be arranged with a senior charge nurse taking into account:

³ Association for Palliative Medicine [COVID-19 and Palliative, End of Life and Bereavement Care in Secondary Care](#)

⁴ PHE [Guidance for care of the deceased with suspected or confirmed coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)

⁵ NHS England [Clinical guide for the management of palliative care in hospital during the coronavirus pandemic](#)

- The emotional needs of the bereaved family.
- Local risk assessment and practical management, including the consideration of whether there is a requirement for visitors to wear PPE.
- Given the limited space available in hospital Bereavement Suites, viewings will be limited to a maximum of 2 close family members (from the same household).
- Visitors should maintain at least a 2 meter distance from staff during viewing.
- For patients with confirmed / suspected COVID-19, it is not advisable for family to touch the deceased during a viewing, unless wearing appropriate PPE such as disposable gloves / apron.⁶

Associated materials / references:

[NHS Lothian Death in Hospital Policy](#)

[NHS Lothian Death in Hospital Procedures](#)

[NHS Lothian Guidance for Completion and Issuing of Medical Certificate of Cause of Death and Bereavement Information for Deaths during COVID-19 \[v4\]](#)

[NHS Lothian Connecting Patients Families, Carers and Friends during Illness and at the End of Life throughout COVID-19](#)

[NHS Lothian Infection Prevention and Control advice to support visiting patients at the end of life during COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Association for Palliative Medicine [COVID-19 and Palliative, End of Life and Bereavement Care in Secondary Care](#) [Accessed 29/05/20]

Chief Medical Officer letter (20 May 2020) [Updated Guidance to Medical Practitioners for Death Certification during the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)

Death Certification Review Service [Guidance for doctors completing MCCD for confirmed or suspected cases of COVID-19 in Scotland](#) [Accessed 29/05/20]

NHS England [Clinical guide for the management of palliative care in hospital during the coronavirus pandemic](#) [Updated 22 April 2020, Accessed 29/05/20]

Public Health England [Guidance for care of the deceased with suspected or confirmed coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Version 2](#) [Updated 15/05/20, Accessed 29/05/20]

Public Health England [Reducing the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the hospital setting](#) [Updated 21/05/20, Accessed 29/05/20]

⁶ Scottish Government [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Guidance for funeral directors on managing infection risks when handling the deceased and funeral services](#)

Scottish Government letter (27 May 2020) [Guidance for Medical Practitioners during the COVID-19 Pandemic – Electronic Transfer of Medical Certificates of Cause of Death \(MCCD\) from Health Services to Registrars and Next of Kin](#)

Scottish Government Health Protection Division (13 April 2020) [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Guidance for funeral directors on managing infection risks when handling the deceased and funeral services](#)
Version 1.4 [Updated, 13/05/20, Accessed 29/05/20]