

Why do death certificates need so much information?

We are aware that this is a very difficult time for you and your family. You may be wondering why you are being asked to answer so many personal questions to prepare a death certificate. We would like to explain the reasoning behind some of the items on the certificate.

Information collected on the death certificate is important to the public health community to evaluate and improve the health of all citizens. Knowledge about the characteristics of the people that are dying from certain types of diseases or injuries (such as age, sex, occupation, education level, geographic location) help health departments to identify clusters of diseases or injuries and to plan targeted prevention programs.

For example, the question on Hispanic ethnicity is often questioned as to its importance. People of Hispanic Origin currently form the largest minority group in the state. In addition, their numbers are increasing faster than any other group, not only in Washington State, but also nationwide. The concern is that someone of Hispanic origin may be of any race. Therefore, we ask the race of the individual and we ask if they were of Hispanic origin. We do collect data on many minority groups (such as Asian, African American, and Native American) through the race question. This information is used to study causes of death in the various groups. We ask: Are certain groups more likely to die at a younger age than others? What are they dying of? We use this information to help prevent premature mortality for all of Washington's citizens. Other groups use the data to make estimates of the state's population in years where the Census Bureau does not collect data.

Another item you may be wondering about are the questions regarding the occupation and industry of the decedent. These items are useful in identifying job-related risks. For example, death certificates were used to help identify the link between asbestos exposure and respiratory diseases. If an individual is retired for a number of years, it is still important to know what their job was to identify low-risk occupations.

Again, we express our sympathy to you and your family, and we hope that this brief informational letter helps you to understand the importance of your cooperation and time. We thank you for your consideration in this matter.