Washington State Department of Health

SENATE JUDICIARY
Exhibit No. 24
Date 2/10/15
Bill No. SB202

Instructions for Medical Examiners, Coroners, and Prosecuting Attorneys: Compliance with the Death with Dignity Act

Washington's Death with Dignity Act (RCW 70.245) states that "...the patient's death certificate…shall list the underlying terminal disease as the cause of death." The act also states that, "Actions taken in accordance with this chapter do not, for any purpose, constitute suicide, assisted suicide, mercy killing, or homicide, under the law."

If you know the decedent used the Death with Dignity Act, you must comply with the strict requirements of the law when completing the death record:

1. The underlying terminal disease must be listed as the cause of death.
2. The manner of death must be marked as "Natural."
3. The cause of death section may not contain any language that indicates that the Death with Dignity Act was used, such as:
    a. Suicide
    b. Assisted suicide
    c. Physician-assisted suicide
    d. Death with Dignity
    e. I-1000
    f. Mercy killing
    g. Euthanasia
    h. Secobarbital or Seconal
    i. Pentobarbital or Nembutal

The Washington State Registrar will reject any death certificate that does not properly adhere to the requirements of the Death with Dignity Act.[1] If a death certificate contains any reference to actions that might indicate use of the act, the Local Registrar and Funeral Director will be instructed, under RCW 70.58.030, to obtain a correction from the medical certifier before a permit to proceed with disposition will be issued.

Call the Department of Health's Center for Health Statistics (360-236-4307) for guidance on how to proceed if you have any questions regarding compliance with cause of death reporting under the Death with Dignity Act.

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[1] Under state law, the State Registrar of Vital Statistics "shall prepare and issue such detailed instruction as may be required to secure the uniform observance of its provisions and the maintenance of a perfect system of registration. … The State Registrar shall carefully examine the certificates received monthly from the local registrars, county auditors, and clerks of the court and, if any are incomplete or unsatisfactory, the State Registrar shall require such further information to be furnished as may be necessary to make the record complete and satisfactory." RCW 43.70.160.

Revised April 8, 2009