

A Fresh Look at Death Certificates Deciphering Causes of Death

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Death Certificates

Sometimes it is almost impossible to read the attending physician's handwritten cause of death, or to understand the terms used. Don't despair, there may be an easy solution.

Some, but not all, death certificates included a number usually written near the area where the cause of death was recorded. Sometimes you may encounter several sets of numbers if there were contributing factors involved in an individual's death. These numbers represent standardized national codes classifying the cause of death, and were typically added by a clerk who processed the death record. The government then used the codes to compile statistical information about all causes of death.

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS			MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	
SEX <i>Male</i>	COLOR OR RACE <i>White</i>	SINGLE MARRIED WIDOWED OR DIVORCED <i>Married</i> <small>(Write the word)</small>	16 DATE OF DEATH <i>Feb. 12</i> , 191 <i>9</i> <small>(Month) (Day) (Year)</small>	
DATE OF BIRTH <i>June 19 - 1893</i> <i>May 15</i> , 1 <small>(Month) (Day) (Year)</small>			17 I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from <i>Feb 3rd</i> , 191 <i>9</i> , to <i>Feb 12</i> , 191 <i>9</i> , that I last saw him alive on <i>Feb 12</i> , 191 <i>9</i> , and that death occurred, on the date stated above, at <i>6 P.M.</i>	
AGE <i>24</i> yrs. <i>7</i> mos. <i>23</i> ds. If LESS than 1 day, hrs. or min.			The CAUSE OF DEATH* was as follows: <i>Influenza pneumonia (Bronch)</i> <small>(Duration) <i>7</i> yrs. <i>8</i> mos. <i>1</i> ds.</small>	
OCCUPATION (a) Trade, profession, or particular kind of work <i>Sup't. of Construction</i>				
BIRTHPLACE (State or country) <i>Ohio</i>				

The number "10" represents the ICD code added by a clerk

PERSONAL AND STATISTICAL PARTICULARS				MEDICAL CERTIFICATE OF DEATH	
3. SEX <i>Male</i>	4. COLOR or RACE <i>White</i>	5. SINGLE, MARRIED, Write the word Widowed or Divorced <i>Widowed</i>		21. DATE OF DEATH (month, day, and year) <i>Apr 8, 1940</i>	
3a. If Married, Widowed, or Divorced Husband of (or) Wife of <i>Louisa</i>			22. I HEREBY CERTIFY, That I attended deceased from <i>Feb</i> 19 <i>40</i> , to <i>April 8</i> , 19 <i>40</i> . I last saw him alive on <i>April 6</i> , 19 <i>40</i> , death is said to have occurred on the date stated above at <i>10 a.m.</i>		
6. DATE OF BIRTH (month, day, and year) <i>Feb. 20, 1871</i>				The PRINCIPAL CAUSE OF DEATH and related causes of importance in order of onset were as follows:	
7. AGE (years) Months Days <i>69</i> <i>1</i> <i>18</i>		If LESS than 1 day..... hrs. or..... min.		Date of onset <i>9/39</i>	
OCCUPATION	8. Trade, profession, or particular kind of work done, as spinner, sawyer, bookkeeper, etc. <i>cyphometer</i>			<i>Pain on a of sigmoid colon</i>	
	9. Industry or business in which work was done, as silk mill, saw mill, bank, etc. <i>3869</i>				
10. Date deceased last worked at this occupation (month and year)			11. Total time (years) spent in this occupation <i>46</i>		CORRECTIVE CAUSES of importance not related

The number 3869 represents an "business or industry" identity code, and should not be confused with ICD Code 46C

In 1900 the U. S. adopted what is called the International Classification of Diseases. This coding system has undergone revisions approximately every ten years since then, the latest taking place in 2004.

The early ICD coding used a numeric system that consisted of 191 different causes of death. An alpha-numeric system was added to Revision 2.

1	Enteric fever
2	Typhus
3	
3A	Relapsing fever
3B	Mediterranean fever
4	Malaria
5	Small-pox
6	Measles
7	Scarlet fever
8	Whooping cough
9	
9A	Diphtheria
9B	Membranous laryngitis
9C	Croup

Example of ICD Codes from Revision 2 – 1909-1919

How to Use the ICD to Decipher Handwritten Causes of Death

Wolfbane Cybernetic, Ltd. has posted the complete set of ICD codes from 1900 through 1990. They are grouped by Revision Numbers 1 through 10. Subsequent revisions will be of little use.

- Begin by examining the death certificate to locate the ICD code as it may have been written anywhere on the certificate
- Select the Revision for the most recent year prior to the individual's date of death then scroll down to find the code number you need
- These codes may help you decipher the illegible handwritten cause of death

The International Classification of Diseases with a complete list of revisions and causes of death codes: <http://www.wolfbane.com/icd/index.html>

The history of the "Classification of Diseases and Causes of Death" by the Center for Disease Control (C.D.C.)
http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/misc/classification_diseases2011.pdf

Classifications of Death – It includes examples of modern classifications and the C.D.C.'s rules governing them.
https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/ppt/nchs2012/li-14_minino.pdf

Old Medical Terminology

Greene, Ryland W., *Lippincott's Pocket Medical Dictionary*. Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1897. <https://archive.org/details/b21782441>

Bureau of the Census, *Manual of the International List of Causes of Death*. Washington, D.C., 1918.
<https://archive.org/stream/manualofinternat00unit#page/n0/mode/2up>