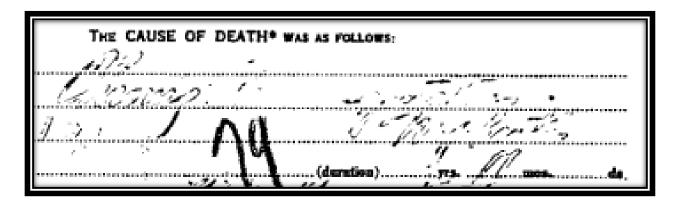# A Fresh Look at Death Certificates
Deciphering Causes of Death

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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.

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

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

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.
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