

SECTION 12 - NURSING HOME DEATHS

I. NURSING HOME DEATHS-GENERAL

NOTE: This section applies to Nursing Homes where medical direction is present or if a decedent has a physician in “attendance”. This section does not apply to senior citizen communities, assisted living centers and the like. Deaths in those facilities shall be considered “unattended deaths” and as such shall be reportable.

When a death occurs in a nursing home or long-term care facility, it is rarely reported to the county coroner. If a person dies while in a nursing home or care facility they are under the care and supervision of a physician, even if the physician was not there at the time of the death. The death is considered “attended”. If no non-natural factors contributed to the admission or death the attending physician has the responsibility of death certification.

Care must be taken when eliciting the history of the terminal illness from the reporter of death. Admission to a hospital, nursing home, or long-term care facility does not automatically determine jurisdiction for death certification. For example, the deaths of many elderly people are the result of a gradual decline in health following a hip fracture. A good rule of thumb is to ask oneself, “Did this person return to their pre-injury level of function prior to death?” If the answer is no, the manner of death cannot be considered natural. In these instances, the county coroner can decline to take custody of the decedent but, to ensure that the death certificate is appropriately certified as an “accident” should assume that responsibility. The best method to preserve the integrity of death statistics is for the county coroner to sign and complete the death certificate based on medical records review and/or the history provided by the reporter.

If a person dies in a nursing home setting and no next of kin can be identified or located by the nursing home staff, the Shelby County Coroner’s Office will assume jurisdiction and attempt to locate next of kin. In the event that next of kin cannot be located, the SCCO will handle the disposition of the body and property of the deceased.