

Medical Examiners in England and Wales

FAQs for bereaved parents

Who are medical examiners? Medical examiners are typically experienced senior doctors who independently review deaths to ensure the recorded cause of death is accurate and reflects what happened. If your baby has died while still under the care of the hospital, a medical examiner should call you within 24-48 hours after your baby's death. They will ask if there's anything you're worried about regarding your baby's care. They will also ask if you have any questions about your baby's cause of death. If you do have concerns about the cause of your baby's death, you can tell your medical examiner. They will listen to you and give you their opinion and possible next steps.

Will a medical examiner review my baby's death? If your baby was born in England or Wales, and was born alive but died after birth, no matter how long they lived, a medical examiner should review their death. If, however, the cause of death is unknown or suspicious in any way, their death will be referred to a coroner. The coroner will decide if their death needs further investigation.

Why are there medical examiners? Before the implementation of a medical examiner's system, when a baby died in hospital, the death would be certified by a doctor, often a neonatologist, without further review. With the introduction of the medical examiner system, death certificates are now reviewed by a team, which includes healthcare professionals and the medical examiner to determine whether further investigation is needed. If it is, the case may be referred to a coroner. Medical examiners are now a legal requirement for all NHS Trusts in England and Wales. Medical examiners' system is in place to not only ensure transparency and improve care but also to provide you with the opportunity to raise any concerns you may have.

Are medical examiner and coroners the same? No, not exactly. While they both examine the circumstances around a death, medical examiners typically look at the deaths which occur in hospital where the cause of death is known or is not thought to be suspicious. Coroners on the other hand are typically lawyers, (though sometimes they can be medical doctors), who certify deaths and issue death certificates in instances where the cause of death is unknown or suspicious. They have the power to hold inquests. The job of a medical examiner is to provide independent oversight of the circumstances around a death

to ensure the cause of death aligns with what happened. They should also consult with you to ensure you are satisfied with the proposed cause of death and to address any concerns you may have.

What is a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death (MCCD)? One of the documents that you will need is a medical Certificate of cause of death (MCCD). An MCCD is a legal document that explains how and why your baby died. The MCCD is a form which will be completed by a medical doctor who cared for your baby before they died or by the coroner.

Is a death certificate the same as an MCCD? No. A death certificate is a permanent legal record that your baby died and their death has been officially registered. An MCCD on the other hand, is a document which gives information about your baby's cause of death as determined by a doctor or coroner. You will need the MCCD in order to register your baby's death and to get a death certificate.

Will the medical examiner issue the MCCD for my baby? Medical examiners cannot issue a MCCD. This can only be done by the medical doctor who cared for your baby when they were alive, or a coroner. If there are no concerns about why your baby died, your baby's medical records and the death certificate will be reviewed by a team, which includes healthcare professionals as well as the medical examiner. If there are no concerns, the medical examiner will work with your baby's doctor to complete the MCCD.

Can medical examiners overrule the cause of death proposed by a coroner? No, medical examiners cannot override the cause of death proposed by a coroner. Coroners have the final say in cases where there is uncertainty around a death. Not only do medical examiners look at a baby's death certificate, but they are also often involved in the local rapid review following a baby's death. During this review, they would have the opportunity to share any concerns you raised during their initial telephone conversations, ensuring that your perspective is considered as part of the review process.

Should a medical examiner have contacted me after my baby died? If your baby died after 2019 at one of the Trusts in England and Wales where they were trialling medical examiners, then you should have been contacted by the medical examiner. If your baby died before this time, or at a hospital where a medical examiner wasn't being piloted, then you won't have had contact from a medical examiner. From September 2024 onward, every bereaved parent should be contacted by a medical examiner.

What is the benefit of having a medical examiner system? The main benefit is that you will be able to speak to the medical examiner to ask questions or raise concerns about your baby's care and their death which you may find helpful. It might also be reassuring that to know that an independent professional is reviewing your baby's death to ensure everything has been thoroughly considered.

Are there any possible drawbacks to the medical examiner system? Some observers have voiced concerns that medical examiners, who may come from any medical

specialty, might not fully understand the specifics of obstetric and neonatal care. However, having a set of ‘fresh eyes’ can provide valuable independent oversight of your baby’s death. Further to this, the medical examiners findings could potentially be different from the findings of other reviews such as a hospital review, or PMRT. It is hoped that this won’t be the case and instead lead to opportunities for collaboration and learning and a chance for improvement.

Another potential drawback could be that because medical examiners will oversee all deaths, not just baby deaths, they might not fully appreciate the needs of bereaved parents. Sands are now providing training for medical examiners to help ensure they are aware of the needs of bereaved parents during the early days after the death of their baby.

Are medical examiners present across the UK? Currently, medical examiners are being introduced only in England and Wales.

What systems are in place in Scotland? In Scotland, different arrangements exist for death certification and registration. The Death Certification Review Service, run by Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS), reviews the accuracy of about 10% of medical certificates of cause of death, with approximately 1% undergoing a more in-depth review.

Are there similar systems in Northern Ireland? Currently, there is a non-statutory Independent Medical Examiner service operating across five Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland.

Does Sands work with Medical Examiners? Sands do not have a role in medical examiner’s work reviewing and certifying MCCDs. However, Sands offers training for medical examiners that focuses on helping them understand the unique needs of parents following the loss of their baby.