

Pronouncing Death

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INTRODUCTION

The College of Licensed Practical Nurses and Health Care Aides of Alberta (CLHA) has the authority under the *Health Professions Act* (HPA) to carry out its activities and govern Licensed Practical Nurses (LPNs)* in a manner that protects and serves the public interest.

LPNs are required to follow their standards of practice, code of ethics, and other regulatory policy documents that govern the LPN profession.

PURPOSE

This practice guideline aims to help LPNs understand key concepts related to the pronouncement of death, including the legal and professional conditions under which LPNs may pronounce death in Alberta. It clarifies the differences between pronouncing death and certifying death. It also identifies the difference between an expected death, an unexpected death, and a reportable death.

CAN AN LPN PRONOUNCE DEATH?

In Alberta, legislation does not prohibit LPNs from pronouncing death except in limited, specific circumstances described below.

Pronouncement Versus Certification of Death

LPNs can pronounce deaths but not certify deaths. Pronouncing a death means performing a physical assessment, determining that a person has no signs of life, and documenting those findings. LPNs pronouncing death follow employer requirements and notify the most responsible health practitioner of the death.

Certifying death means legally confirming and recording the cause and manner of death on a death certificate. In Alberta, only a physician or medical examiner can certify deaths under section 33 of the *Vital Statistics Act*. However, in some cases, a Nurse Practitioner can also certify death under section 26 of the *Vital Statistics Information Regulation*.

*In this document, "LPN(s)" has the same meaning as "regulated member(s)" in the *Health Professions Act*.

Expected, Unexpected, and Notifiable Deaths

An expected death is one that occurs because of an acute or gradual deterioration in a client's health status, usually due to an advanced, progressive, or incurable disease. Here, death is foreseen and expected. Examples include individuals with terminal illnesses such as advanced cancer or neurodegenerative diseases like amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), where progression and eventual outcomes such as death are expected.

An unexpected death is often sudden, unexplainable, preventable, or happens earlier than expected, even if someone has a chronic condition. An unexpected death can also be a reportable death. Examples of reportable deaths may include, but are not limited to, deaths that occur when the deceased was in apparently good health, are the result of violence, accident, suicide, or poisoning, pregnancy-related, or because of improper or negligent treatment. See section 10 of the *Fatality Inquiries Act* (FIA) for a full list of reportable deaths. Deaths of this nature must be reported to the medical examiner or an investigator under the FIA, who will then determine if they need to launch an investigation. For more detailed guidance on an LPN's responsibilities, see the *Duty to Report* interpretive document.

Conditions on Pronouncing Death

LPNs may pronounce death as part of their professional role, provided all the following conditions are met:

- they have the necessary knowledge, skills, and competence;
- the employer has authorized LPNs to pronounce deaths;
- the death is expected; and
- there is no possibility of organ or tissue donation.

Even though it is within the LPN scope of practice to pronounce an expected death, an individual LPN may lack the necessary knowledge, skills, or competence, or they may not be authorized by their employer to pronounce death. LPNs need to use critical thinking and clinical judgment to determine if they are the most appropriate healthcare practitioner available to pronounce death at the time. Please refer to the *Determining Licensed Practical Nurse Scope of Practice* guideline document for more information.

When Pronouncing Death Falls Outside LPNs' Scope of Practice

LPNs may not pronounce death in the following circumstances:

- if the death is unexpected, reportable, unexplained, involves trauma, or is under suspicious circumstances;
- if there's a chance the person may be an organ or tissue donor;
- if their employer or workplace does not allow LPNs to pronounce death, in which case LPNs must follow their employer's requirements; or
- if an LPN doesn't feel confident or competent in making the determination.

CONCLUSION

LPNs may pronounce an expected death when they are trained, competent, and have employer authorization. There must be no possibility of organ or tissue donation.

In all other circumstances, the LPN should report the apparent death to the most responsible health practitioner. LPNs should always practice within their regulatory scope of practice, follow legal and professional guidance, follow employer requirements, and use critical thinking and good judgment.

Documents are updated frequently. For the most current version and access to related documents and resources, please visit the Knowledge Hub on clha.com.

If, after reading this document, you have questions about LPN responsibilities in the process of pronouncing death, please contact the CLHA's Professional Practice Team at practice@clha.com, 780-484-8886 or 1-800-661-5877 (toll-free in Alberta).