**How to approach verification of death**

Medical school trains you on the steps to verify a death. However, it can never truly *teach* you how to deal with being asked to verify a death. It is a common task during on calls, but one with an emotional burden that should be approached with care and respect.

**Tip 1: Emotion is normal**

The advice offered in this guide is not universal, as everyone experiences a different reaction to managing a recently deceased person for the first few times. This is because everyone approaches the situation with different prior experiences in life. Some people may have seen several dead bodies in the past, whether it be in the dissection room or in a home setting. Some people may not have seen a recently deceased person before. This is fine. Reacting emotionally is normal. If this happens, take a few moments, have a cup of tea, speak to someone in private if necessary, and take time to reflect later. This could be a vital learning experience.

**Tip 2: Undertake the job in a timely manner**

Whilst verification of death is rarely regarded as a strictly ‘urgent’ job for an on call shift, you should take care not to delay for too long. If a patient dies in the evening or night, it is good practice to verify the death before midnight if possible. This is because the patient is not legally dead until the point of your verification. The date of death has implications for the family and legal documentation, therefore keeping the date as accurate as possible is important.

**Tip 3: Respect is key**

You should treat recently deceased patients with the same dignity and respect as you do for all your patients. Some doctors speak to the patient as they verify the death and most introduce themselves as they would to any patient. Some argue that leaving their bleep outside is important, as they do not wish to be interrupted during verification, as a mark of respect. You may have your own outlook and process to verification of death, however ensure that the patient is respected at all times. This respect extends to the family: they will likely be present around the time of verification, and should be given space to grieve. If on call, explain carefully that you are not the regular doctor, but the nursing staff will attempt to answer their questions and the day team will sort the documentation.

**Tip 4: Make things as easy as possible for the day team**

In your day job, when you find out a patient has died out of hours, you will have to complete a death certificate and possibly a cremation form or coroners request. This is made infinitely easier if the verifying doctor has documented certain information. This includes those present at death, if there were any concerns, any pacemaker or intra-medullary nail, or if a DNACPR was in place.

**Tip 5: A reminder of the steps**

The steps to verifying and documenting death are as follows. Please be aware that local guidelines may vary and should be strictly adhered to.  
  
- wash your hands and check the patients identity via wrist band  
- Check response to voice or painful stimuli  
- Check breath sounds for 3 mins  
- Check carotid pulse for 1 mins  
- Check heart sounds 2 mins  
- Check pupillary reflex  
- Complete documentation including time of death and your contact details  
- Wash hands and inform the nurses that the patient’s death has been verified