TO:
HEADS OF PROVINCIAL HEALTH DEPARTMENTS
HOSPITAL CEOs and CLINICAL MANAGERS
PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR DOCTORS

MEDICAL CERTIFICATION OF DEATHS DUE TO COVID-19

1. The World Health Organization (WHO) has recently provided international guidelines on the medical certification of cause of death due to Covid-19. This indicates that Covid-19 should be recorded on the medical certificate of cause of death for ALL decedents where Covid-19 caused, or is assumed to have caused, or contributed to death.

2. Mortality due to Covid-19 is an important population-based measure of the epidemic. When testing for SARS-CoV-2 is constrained, death information becomes even more important. For this reason, it is imperative that clinicians in South Africa are aware of their obligation under law to report accurate causes of death on the South African death notification form. This means that clinicians are bound by law to report Covid-19 as a cause of death in cases where this has been confirmed, as well as in cases where, in their opinion this is the most probable cause of death, even if a test result is not available to confirm this.

3. Definition of a death due to Covid-19 (Based on WHO ICD-10)

   a. A death due to Covid-19 is defined for surveillance purposes as a death resulting from an illness which is compatible with Covid-19 (based on laboratory confirmation OR on clinical features only).

   b. The underlying cause of death of a person who has been diagnosed with Covid-19 (either on the basis of laboratory confirmation or on clinical grounds only) should be stated as Covid-19 (in Part 1 of the medical certificate of cause of death) unless a clear alternative or unrelated supervening medical cause of death (such as trauma or poisoning) is apparent.

   c. The death of a person in whom Covid-19 has been diagnosed (clinically or by laboratory confirmation) but who suffers from advanced pre-existing disease (such as severe cardiovascular disease or malignancy) should be carefully considered and clinical discretion used to determine the underlying cause of death. If the pre-existing condition / disease is then considered to be the underlying cause of death, but Covid-19 may have played a contributing role

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in the demise of the patient, Covid-19 should ALSO be clearly stated in the causal sequence leading to death (in Part 1 of the medical certificate). Where pre-existing conditions are controlled and/or in the background, report these in Part 2 of the medical certificate of cause of death.

d. Covid-19 should not be stated on the death certificate if there is a clear alternative cause of death, in which Covid-19 played no causal or contributory role (such as trauma or poisoning). Covid-19 should also not be stated as cause of death if there has been a period of complete recovery from the disease.

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