

**Role of the Registered Nurse in the Pronouncement of Death
Position Statement**

Question:

What are the circumstances in which a Registered Nurse (RN) may pronounce death?

Definition(s):

Pronouncement of death by a registered nurse – The determination made after an assessment by the RN that there is an absence of human responses, spontaneous breathing and heart rate. Pronouncement is not to be confused with or construed as certification of death.

Determination of Death (VSA Title 18, Chapter 107, §5218) – An individual who has sustained either irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem, or irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions is dead. A determination of death must be in accordance with accepted medical standards. (Added 1981, No. 62, eff. April 30, 1981)

Certification of Death (VSA Title 18, Chapter 107 §5202) – The certification of death shall be done by a physician.

Background:

Registered nurses assess human responses to health and illness, formulate nursing diagnoses, plan nursing interventions, and direct and evaluate nursing practice. A Registered Nurse is qualified by both education and experience to diagnose the absence of human responses and therefore, can diagnose the absence of responsiveness, spontaneous breathing, and heart beat.

Position Statement which Reflects Nurse’s Roles and Responsibilities:

When the death of a patient is expected and the patient’s provider cannot be present within a reasonable time to determine death, a registered nurse may pronounce death. When death has occurred, the RN present may diagnose the absence of human responses, spontaneous breathing and heart beat and document the time and date of the determination.

References/Citations:

The American Heritage Stedman’s Medical Dictionary. (2008) Retrieved December 10, 2008 from <http://www.stedmans.com>

American Nurses Association (2001). “Code for nurses with interpretive strategies” Washington, DC.

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This opinion is subject to change as changes in nursing practice occur.