Section 10: Death Recording

INTRODUCTION

Because of the large number of UBC deaths occurring along the border, there must be mechanisms to count them, which we propose should be combined with the death recording process.

ISSUES

Antemortem data is not always attainable for UBC decedents

1. Under normal conditions, the medical examiner or coroner must obtain the information from an informant (usually a family member or a friend) who has knowledge of the facts. But in the case of unattended deaths of presumed UBCs, the officer may not have access to the informant, resulting in certificates that lack sufficient information for assigning codes for statistical purposes [12].

2. Certain items (such as ethnicity, and time of death) may be unknown and the medical examiner or coroner by officers.

Variation in death records among states, many of which are dramatically abridged from U.S. Standard Certificate of Death (USSCD)

Although standard federal death certificates contains a section on death sequencing that would compel the official submitting it to enter sufficient information to allow a researcher to identify the decedent as a UBC, state forms may not require the same standards of reporting.

Multiple surnames are common in Latin America, but cannot be accommodated in many death certificates

A report from the Center for Disease Control notes that USSCD has problems dealing with multiple surnames, which are common in Latin American countries [12].
**BEST PRACTICES**

An accepted goal of systematic collection of information via a U.S. standard certificate of death is to provide accurate and permanent record of the fact of death and circumstances of death and the cause of death. It also records personal information about the decedent, necessary for the development of public health research and research agendas [12]. This information is collected by the Center for Disease Control to monitor the nation’s public health needs. In this sense, the USSCD provides a possibility for systematically recording UBC deaths.

**Primary Recommendation: Add UBC checkbox on USSCD**

The best way to facilitate the collection of statistics on UBC decedents would be to add a box on the federal and state standard death certificate to indicate a UBC.

**Secondary Recommendation: Implement regulations for universal use of USSCD**

If adding a UBC checkbox does not occur, a secondary and alternative recommendation is to ensure that the U.S. standard form is used throughout the country. Short of modifying the U.S. standard certificate of death, the form as it stands may also allow documentation of conditions leading to the death, which could indirectly help investigators compile evidence to identify the decedent as a UBC (see box 32, highlighted in Figure 15). Registration of related multiple conditions on the death certificate or report would provide greater accuracy for enumerating the number of UBC deaths, and statistical data on causes of death.

The USSCD provides a way for listing a chronology of disease or injury leading to death for more precise recording of death of presumed UBCs that are important for the more accurate accounting of the number of deaths that are related to unauthorized border crossing. A listing of these conditions aid in the investigation of the relationship between conditions. Although the single cause of death is not incorrect from a clinical standpoint, it may not include sufficient information for assigning codes for statistical purposes that would distinguish UBC deaths from others.

1. Medico-legal officials should refer to the guidelines provided by the World Health Organization that address the importance of registering the entire sequence of conditions leading to death as well as other conditions contributing significantly to death [12].

2. Medico-legal officers should consult *Medical Examiners’ and Coroners’ Handbook on Death Registration and Fetal Death Reporting* [12] for guidelines for entering the sequence of events (see box 32 of the *U.S. Standard Certificate of Death*, Figure 17), adding lines if necessary, as recommended by this handbook.

3. When medical officer cannot determine the etiology of a process such as dehydration, hyperthermia or hypothermia (some of the most common of conditions that UBCs face), additional information should be reported on the death certificate [50], and if possible, provide a sequence to help explain the certification chosen. For example, if someone dies of hypothermia and dies in a desolate place, then researchers may be able to identify the death as a UBC death.
Figure 15: Appendix A, page 107 of the *Medical Examiners’ and Coroners’ Handbook on Death Registration and Fetal Death Reporting* shows a U.S. Standard Certificate of Death. A rectangle surrounds box 32, which facilitates the recording of a sequence of events leading to a death. The full completion of this section would allow for researchers to identify potential UBCs, even if they were not directly recorded as such.
SUPPLEMENTAL AUTOPSY PROTOCOL FOR UNKNOWN PERSONS

ML # _______________  Dr. _____________  Date __________

Name association: _____________________________________________

Source of name association: ______________________________________

UBC:  Y  N  Likely

Viewable face:  Y  N  Partially

Fingerprints obtained:  Y  N  Pending

Hands removed:  Y  N

Body Condition Stage:  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8

Estimated PMI: _______________________________________________

FEATURES OF IDENTIFICATION

Sex:  M  F  ?  Estimated Age: ____  Complexion: _________________

Height: ____ inches  Weight: ____ pounds  Teeth: ________________

Head Hair: Color ____ Length ____  Facial Hair: Mustache  Goatee  Beard

Scars/Marks/Piercings (size, shape, location): __________________________

Tattoos (description, location): ______________________________________

Other unique features: ____________________________________________

Figure 16: Supplementary autopsy form from the Pima County Office of the Medical Examiner. The box encircles the UBC notation which could be used to count UBC deaths, if used throughout the border region.
Tertiary Recommendation: Companion death certificate form to note decedents’ UBC status

Recognizing that implementation of complete national use of a USSCD will also be difficult to attain, this manual has a third alternative recommendation to record UBC deaths. This final alternative can be simply and practically implemented immediately. We recommend that there is a secondary death notation form submitted with the standard death certificate, noting whether a decedent is a UBC.

Figure 16 is a sample companion document that should be used by forensic personnel conducting postmortem investigations, which will facilitate the counting of UBCs. This should be utilized for all suspected UBC deaths. To accomplish this, a criteria for recognizing a UBC must necessarily be standardized across all jurisdictions (see Criteria for Identification of UBCs box in Introduction).

The following information should be adapted to any form used to record UBC deaths, whether it involves the primary, secondary, or tertiary recommendation:

Including more than one surname would provide for greater accuracy

1. The Medical Examiners’ and Coroners’ Handbook on Death Registration and Fetal Death Reporting [12] provides guidance for registering the name of decedents if there are more than two first names or middle names. The recommendation is that the officer should make a determination and include the two names in the same field with a space in-between the two names. No mention is made of those individuals with more than one surname, as is customary in those populations that make up the majority of undocumented border crossers. However, two surnames should be included following this recommendation for accommodating more than one name of the same type.

2. Medico-legal officials should refer to the guidelines for entering more than one name in a field to register the death of a decedent to include more than one surname.

Using GPS coordinates would provide greater accuracy for recording place of death under circumstances where the location of death is poorly defined

1. Section 14 of the USSCD provides a place for medico-legal officers to record where the death occurred and where the place of death is well defined. However, in the case of unattended deaths of presumed UBCs and where the discovery of the deceased may be poorly defined - e.g., listed as “remote desert” - as much information should be included as possible.

2. A best practice would be to provide GPS coordinates in the space provided.

The date and place of burial (if applicable), with information to identify the gravesite, should be provided [17]
Whatever procedures for the death recording of UBC decedents should also be used for abandoned infant/apparent newborn and fetuses

1. Some literature points to the phenomenon of spontaneous delivery by pregnant UBC women en route to the United States. If the infant is considered to have lived, even for a very short time following delivery, then the medical examiner or coroner should use the death certificate, but must also ensure that the birth of this infant is properly registered.

2. If the infant is considered to be a fetal death or stillborn, then the appropriate fetal death report must be completed, including the sequence of death information that may allow researchers to associate the death with a UBC.