

WINDOW

Business / Besigheid



UNNATURAL CAUSES OF DEATH

Martin Du Toit

When we think of unnatural causes of death, we usually think of traffic accidents, homicide or even suicide. In reality, there are numerous circumstances in which a death can be classified as “unnatural”.

Any person who passes away due to unnatural causes must undergo a post-mortem examination, conducted by the Government Forensic Pathology Service to determine the exact cause of death. Here are a few examples of deaths that are considered unnatural:

- Any death due to physical or chemical influence. Examples include stabbing, shooting, blunt force trauma, car accidents, heat/cold exposure, electrocution, ingestion or injection of toxins or narcotics, inhalation (of fumes), etc.

- Any complications of the above, i.e. bronchopneumonia after a head injury. According to the Health Professions Amendment Act 29 of 2007, the death of a person undergoing — or as a result of — a medical procedure will not be deemed as a death due to natural causes. For instance, a person who has suffered cardiac arrest while undergoing an operation, must be transferred to the Government Forensic Pathology Service for a post-mortem examination, so that the exact cause of death can be determined before an undertaker can be contacted.

The hospital staff will arrange this. If a death occurs as a result of a procedure, it is classified as unnatural, even if years have passed since the procedure was done. For example, if a person undergoes an operation and goes into a coma for years before passing away, the death is likely a result of the operation and will be considered unnatural.

In the case of sudden and unexpected, or unex-

plained deaths – where the cause of death is not apparent – a post-mortem examination is also required to determine whether the death was due to natural or unnatural causes. An example of this is Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (Cot Death) or the death of a sportsman during a sporting event. As funeral undertakers, we are not allowed to remove a person from the place of death if they passed away due to unnatural causes.

If a family member passes away at home under any of the abovementioned circumstances, or if you suspect that the death was due to unnatural causes, inform the police immediately. Paramedics and emergency medical services also declare the death as natural or unnatural on scene.

The South African Police Services (SAPS) will always open a case when on the scene. If a patient dies in hospital or is dead on arrival, and an unnatural death is suspected, a D28 form must be completed by the hospital. If a procedure was done in theatre, then a GW7/24 must be completed as well.

The hospital then contacts the SAPS in their respective areas, where a police officer will complete an SAP 180 form, contact the SAPS Forensic Pathology Services to collect the deceased in order to determine the cause of death via a post-mortem.

The family will be instructed to contact a funeral undertaker after the post-mortem has been completed. Once the remains have been released to the funeral undertaker, the family can proceed with the funeral arrangements



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