New Technology Aimed at 'Ending the Death Certificate Paper Chase'

With technology and innovation permeating nearly every other aspect of modern medicine, it might be argued that sparse attention has been focused on the final act of patient care: issuing and signing the death certificate. But all of that may change as a new process unites hospitals, physicians and funeral directors in an online environment specifically designed to manage the signing, tracking and distributing of digital death certificates. The system was pioneered and developed by eCedent LLC, a software developer based in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

"This is a perfect example of how IT has given healthcare providers the ability to stay compliant in an area where it has been most difficult in the past," said Sean O'Brien, director of Member Services and IT for Hospital Council of Western Pennsylvania.

Indiana Regional Medical Center, along with its medical staff and the county's 10 funeral homes were selected by eCedent to pilot the process earlier this year. The new process was also recently approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Health.

"The process is extremely easy and streamlined," said Eric Heasly, M.D., a participating physician in the pilot project. "It saves both time and aggravation for physicians."

Chuck Conrad, eCedent president, said that busy physicians, often associated with several hospitals and/or nursing homes, sometimes have to drive back to healthcare facilities to sign paper death certificates so that final arrangements can be completed by funeral homes and families.

"In the past, physicians were able to personally do rounds almost every day," Conrad said. "Now, with the need to divide up work in larger practices, a physician might be assigned to rounds every other day or every third day. Often physicians don't feel comfortable signing death certificates for their partners' patients. Since certificates are time-sensitive documents, personal care physicians make special trips back to the hospital or nursing home to sign them. It's counter-productive and terribly inefficient."

By logging onto eCedent.com, physicians can sign death certificates from any Internet-connected computer 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Automatic e-mail, fax or text message notifications keep the physician informed every time a death certificate needs signed. In addition, a separate notification can also be sent simultaneously to a practice or office manager, freeing the physician for patient contact without being tethered to the computer waiting to be notified of a patient's death. "Best of all," Conrad said, "physicians pay nothing at all to participate."

Pennsylvania's approval of eCedent's process is a first for the Commonwealth in terms of permitting digital signatures for death certificates. From the hospital perspective, Stephen Wolfe, chief executive officer of Indiana Regional Medical Center said, "We see this as a positive step forward for our medical records staff and our physicians who have a lot of elderly patients. Once we implemented this, people have been very pleased with the simplicity of completing this process."

From the funeral director's perspective, this new process has greatly increased efficiency. "Implementing this process has improved the service we can provide to families of the deceased," said Michael Minich of Bowser Minich Funeral Home in Indiana, Pennsylvania.

"The number one complaint funeral directors have is trying to get signatures for death certificates from physicians," said Minich. "Physicians are busy people and they don't have a lot of spare time on their hands. In the meantime, families are trying to complete their legal affairs related to property, life insurance and securities, and this is all dependent on a signed death certificate."

He noted that with eCedent, physicians can sign the certificate within a few minutes and log off.

Users of the system in the pilot test, as well as those now using it in real-time, have praised it for its simplicity and convenience. With the approval from the Pennsylvania Department of Health, the company is now marketing the program to hospitals, physicians, coroners and funeral directors. Hospital Council of Western Pennsylvania, headquartered in Warrendale, Pennsylvania, is the marketing agent for eCedent to its healthcare facilities throughout the region.

For more information about eCedent, contact Chuck Conrad at chuck@ecedent.com or (724) 471-7480 or Sean O'Brien at Hospital Council of Western Pennsylvania at obriens@hcwp.org or (724) 772-7284.