



## **SUDDEN DEATH ON PREMISES**

### **Guidance for New Zealand Accommodation Industry**

This fact sheet provides some practical advice to the NZ Accommodation Industry when faced with the discovery of a sudden death on their premises.

There is a legal requirement to report a death to Police as soon as practicable when:

- you find a body; or
- learn of a death where the cause is unknown, the result of a suicide, or is unnatural or violent.

#### **1. Your Most Important Consideration**

Your first and over riding concern should always be preserving life and that includes your own.

This has two implications:

- consider whether the situation presents a risk to you; be aware that whatever killed the person might also harm you. Obvious risks are from electrocution, poisoning<sup>1</sup>, infection etc. ; and
- consider rendering assistance; even persons experienced in handling bodies can have difficulty in determining death. If you have any doubts at all and you think the person may still be alive your response should be to call an ambulance (phone 111) and, if appropriate and you are capable of doing so, provide first aid.

#### **2. Call Ambulance Immediately and Involve Police as soon as Practical**

When you make the 111 call, Ambulance will ask you a standardised set of questions and may transfer you to Police who will also ask you a standardised set of questions to collect the information necessary for them to respond. Aside from your own details these will include:

- your location;
- where the body is located;
- whether an offender is present;
- who is currently in attendance;
- the deceased details if known (name, age and gender);

Ambulance staff will verify the person is deceased. Police will initially assist Ambulance.

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the chemicals and processes involved in producing methamphetamine can become explosive and / or give off toxic fumes that attack skin, eyes, and the mucous membranes of the respiratory tract and can cause death.

Police must advise the Coroner of deaths that are reported to them and must investigate to determine the circumstances and cause of death. You can expect that they will promptly attend the scene.

### **3. Preserve the scene**

Having dealt with the considerations in point 1 and 2 above you should prepare for the arrival of the Police.

Although the vast majority of sudden deaths will be innocuous, Police will still need to investigate. This process may be made more difficult if the scene has been disturbed. Remember that in a worst case scenario the room occupied by the deceased may be a crime scene.

Therefore, whilst awaiting the arrival of Police, the safest course of action is that the body should not be moved, touched or covered and as far as practical try to limit access to it.

Nothing should be allowed to be taken out of the room and it should be left undisturbed so that evidence is not lost. This is particularly important when there is any suspicion of suicide or a culpable death.

Keep people who may have been with the deceased or have discovered the death out of the room but nearby so they can be interviewed by the Police.

### **4. Police Attendance**

The action that Police will take on arrival and length of time they will remain at the scene depends on the circumstances of the death.

In a best case scenario the person's doctor will be prepared to issue a certificate as to the cause of death. In that case Police will cease to be involved and arrangements will be made for the body to be immediately removed by a funeral director.

If the death is believed to be the result of homicide, forensic examination of the scene can take more than two days and will involve attendance by large numbers of specialist forensic staff and investigators. Expect access to the area to be severely restricted during this process.

Suicides and suspicious deaths may also require the attendance of investigators and other specialists; again you should expect that access to the area will be restricted.

Police will work with you so that they can get their investigation completed whilst minimising disruption to your business.

You will likely be asked by Police to make a written statement. This is standard practice for the person who found the body and for the person who last saw the deceased alive.

### **5. The 'Coronial Process'**

Police will report the results of their investigation to the Coroner, who then decides whether an inquiry or inquest should be held.

Not all deaths result in an inquest but the Coroner may decide to hold one to determine circumstances and cause of the death. If the death is believed to be self inflicted then an inquest must be held. If the Coroner elects to hold an inquest into the death you may be required to present evidence as to what you witnessed. Police will liaise with you if this is required.

More detailed information on the coronial process is published on the Ministry of Justice website see <http://www.justice.govt.nz/courts/coroners-court/when-someone-dies-a-guide-to-the-coronial-services-of-new-zealand>.

## **6. Support**

Police work closely with Victim Support. They will normally be notified of these types of incidents and make support staff available to anyone affected. Accommodation owners or staff affected should ask attending Police about Victim Support and seek a referral if it has not already been offered.