Since the inception of a national vital statistics system, the states and the federal government have worked together cooperatively to promote standards and consistency among state vital statistics systems. The U. S. Standard Certificates of Birth and Death, and Report of Fetal Death are the principal means of promoting uniformity in the data collected by the states. These documents are reviewed and revised approximately every 10 years through a process that includes broad input from data providers and users. In 1997, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) appointed a panel of vital statistics data providers and users to evaluate the (1989) certificates. That panel completed its work in April 1999, and submitted recommended revisions to NCHS.

As one of its findings, the panel recommended that NCHS develop and promulgate standards for vital statistics data collection and processing. One of the reasons for this was that the Working Group to Improve Data Quality found a decline in vital statistics birth data quality associated in part with electronic registration of vital events. Over the past 15 years, automation has had a significant effect on the nations’ vital statistics system. Currently, over 95 percent of births are registered electronically and the move toward electronic death registration is accelerating. Unfortunately, these electronic systems were developed in a piecemeal fashion in an environment of constantly changing technology options. As a result, data quality issues not seen prior to the Electronic Birth Registration (EBR) systems began to surface. Many of these quality issues along with issues that appeared to be a problem for both paper and electronic systems are documented in the "Report of the Working Group to Improve the Quality of Birth Data."

With the development of electronic systems for new standard certificates there is an opportunity to prevent some of the problems identified by the “Working Group” and improve data quality. One way to improve data quality as well as to ensure uniformity in the national databases is to include, as part of the implementation package, detailed specifications for electronic as well as paper systems. All vital statistics registration areas as well as software vendors will have the same set of specifications for data submission to NCHS. As a result, differences in data due to software created by different vendors should be minimized.

The data specifications for electronic birth, death, and fetal death registration systems include:

- Mechanisms for incorporating recommended worksheets into the system
- Item specific edit criteria
- Computational algorithms
- Item code specifications
• Response categories, including drop down menus and “pick lists” (excluding cause of death)
• Requirements for context specific help
• Electronic transmission standards

The overall goal of these specifications is to have the electronic systems identify, and wherever possible, rectify data problems as close to data entry as possible. To that end, we recommend that the systems edit and query at the time the data is entered and that a second level of editing be performed for some items, once the record is filed with the state office. Editing performed close to the time that data are collected should greatly minimize queries from state offices to data providers. In addition, the editing and resolving of problems before data are transmitted to NCHS should reduce queries from NCHS to the states and maximize resolution of data problems before data are transmitted to NCHS when it is often too late for them to be fixed.

This document focuses on death records, it replaces Instruction Manual Part 4, “Demographic Classification and Coding Instructions for Death Records. The document was issued in 2005.

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