

## Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Data

The following presents information about the quality of the Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages (RBDM) death registration administrative data collection.

Quality is a multidimensional concept which does not just include the accuracy of data, but also stretches to include other aspects such as relevance and interpretability. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Data Quality Framework has therefore been used to provide a broader assessment of RBDM deaths data holdings.

### INSTITUTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Queensland deaths data is sourced from death registrations administered by RBDM. Information about the deceased is supplied to RBDM by a relative or other person acquainted with the deceased (known as the informant) ordinarily via a Funeral Director, while information on the cause of death is either supplied by the medical practitioner certifying the death on a Medical Certificate of Cause of Death or supplied as a result of a coronial investigation.

Civil registration of deaths is compulsory in Australia and registration services in Queensland are delivered by RBDM under the legislative framework provided by the *Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Act 2003* (BDMR Act) and the Births, Deaths and Marriages Registration Regulation 2015 (BDMR Regulation).

The legislative framework provided by the BDMR Act and BDMR Regulation, regulates the life events that can, or must, be registered, the information that must be provided for registration purposes, the requirements to access information and the types of life event certificates that can be issued. The BDMR Act also provides for the appointment of a Registrar, to support the proper administration of the BDMR Act.

The Registrar has a number of express functions and powers relating to the maintenance of the register. In particular, the Registrar:

- must maintain a register, for each type of registrable event, together with indexes necessary to make the information in the register reasonably accessible;
- must register a registrable event;
- may conduct an inquiry to find out whether a registrable event has happened;
- may make corrections to a register.

While RBDM is not a statistical agency additional information as part of the civil registration process is collected for national statistical, research and planning purposes under the objects of the BDMR Act. The critical act of recording important events in people's lives such as births, deaths, and marriages provide individuals with the official recognition and documentation necessary to establish identity, family relationships and civil status. However, the vital statistics and information that can be generated from civil registration also significantly contribute to the formulation of effective and efficient evidence-based policy across multiple sectors for Australia.

The use and disclosure of personal information is closely controlled under the BDMR Act to protect the privacy of individuals and protect against the risk that information will be misused. When releasing information under agreements with other agencies the Registrar is also required to comply with the

*Information Privacy Act 2009* (Qld) (IP Act) and the Information Privacy Principles (IPPs), which set out how personal information must be collected, stored, used and disclosed.

## RELEVANCE

Registration of a death is the responsibility of each state and territory Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages and is based on data provided on an information form completed by a relative or other person acquainted with the deceased.

### *Core purpose of data collection*

The BDMR Regulation sets out the information that must be collected by RBDM to register a death and the information that must be included in certificates. The primary objectives of death registration are to:

- provide evidence of the event (death) registered and proof of age, identity and parentage;
- preserve life-event records for future generations.

However, RBDM collects additional information for administrative purposes and to ensure the reliability of the registration. Supplementary information is also collected as part of the registration process to be used for used for statistical, research and planning purposes. Although these activities are not expressed explicitly as a power of the Registrar, they align with the objects of the BDMR Act.

Vital statistics derived from Australia's civil registration system provide annual flow demographic statistics for population estimates and projections, studies of mortality, fertility and health, and the construction of life tables. The United Nation's Statistical Division's 'Principles and Recommendations for a Vitals Statistics System', Revision 3 (2014), pg5 recommend that:

*'Vital statistics are obtained preferably through a civil registration system, as this is the ideal source from which to derive accurate, complete, timely and continuous information on vital events. In addition, vital statistics derived from the civil registration system (and the population registers) can include annual flow statistics from the smallest civil divisions, which no other data-collection system can provide'.*

The *Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975* (Cth) outlines the functions of the bureau to ensure the coordination of official bodies (including Departments and authorities of the States) in the collection compilation and dissemination of statistics for the country. The *Statistical Returns Act 1896* (Qld) empowers the Statistician to collect and publish statistics in relation to (among other things) population and vital statistics (Section 4 (1)(a)) and social statistics (Section 4(1)(c)).

The BDMR Act also allows the Registrar to enter into an arrangement for provision of information to an entity that is in the public interest. This power recognises the significant community value of the information RBDM holds for statistical, research and planning purposes relating to population, fertility, health, mortality and other matters. For example, information collected as part of the death registration process makes up essential information for key health and demographic statistics in the National Minimum Dataset. The National Minimum Dataset is used for:

- determining life expectancy, mortality trends and national population projections;
- analysing family structures and other social indicators;
- community planning; and
- informing government health policies and related services.

Death registration information is also used to help ensure the timely removal of deceased people from databases to support database quality and the efficient closure of records for deceased people.

### **Key data items**

The prescribed information collected for inclusion on the death register is set out in Schedule 1 part 3 of the BDMR Regulation and includes:

- Name at time of death
- Place of birth, if known
- Age and sex
- Date and place of death
- Occupation
- Marital status
- If born overseas, year of arrival in Australia
- Date and place of burial or cremation
- Name of person certifying, minister of religion (and religion) or other person officiating the burial or cremation
- Name of each former husband, wife or civil partner (if applicable)
- Deceased person's age at the time of each marriage or civil partnership
- Place of each marriage or where the civil partnership was registered or entered into
- Children's names and age/s (if applicable)
- Parents names and maiden surname (mother)
- Parent's occupation
- Applicants name, residential address and relationship to the deceased
- Cause of death
- Duration of person's last illness
- Name of certifying doctor

RBDM also gathers some information in the death registration application that is not prescribed in the BDMR Regulation including:

- Date of birth (if known), usual residential address of the deceased
- Relationship status (never validly married, married, divorced, widowed, civil partnership terminated, de facto or unknown)
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander origin identifier
- Retirement status
- Time of death, and time of birth (if stillborn)
- Date and type of surgery if deceased underwent an operation or procedure within 4 weeks of death
- Pregnancy status

### **Scope of data collection**

Registration of a death by a relative or other person acquainted with the deceased is required by law. A Medical Certificate of Cause of Death must also be completed by a medical practitioner providing cause of death information on the deceased person and provided to RBDM.

Deaths data includes:

- all deaths that happened in Queensland
- deaths of temporary visitors to Queensland

- deaths occurring within Australian Territorial waters
- deaths occurring in transit (i.e. on ships or planes) if 'next port of call' was in Queensland
- deaths required to be registered in Queensland as directed by a Court

Deaths data excludes:

- deaths that have been registered in another state or territory, or another country

### **Geographic Classifications**

The usual residential address of the deceased is collected as part of the death registration process. This can be used to define geographical areas for data output. Currently, this raw data is not geo-coded.

The deceased's country of birth information is also captured on the death registration statement. However, this data is not classified to a classification of countries.

The deaths data collection includes demographic items as well as causes of death information obtained from the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death and Medical Certificate of Cause of Perinatal Death. Causes of death are coded by the ABS according to the International Classification of Diseases (ICD). However, the ICD are not updated in the register against the raw causes of death data.

RBDM is the Australian Coordinating Registry (ACR) for the national Cause of Death Unit Record File (COD URF). The ACR coordinates the approval and release of COD URF files on behalf of the data custodians. This national data set is stored separately to the Qld death register and contains the ICD codes.

### **TIMELINESS**

In Queensland, the process of registering a death involves the collection and matching of numerous sets of data:

- i. The death registration form supplied by a relative or other person acquainted with the deceased, or by an official of the institution where the death occurred.
- ii. A Medical Certificate of Cause of Death must also be supplied and certified by a medical practitioner providing information on the cause of death or supplied as a result of a coronial investigation.

If both sets of data are not received, and are therefore not able to be matched, a death cannot be registered.

Under the BDMR Act, a death registration must be submitted within 14 days after the death, or after the death is discovered, whichever happens later. A Medical Certificate of Cause of Death must also be completed by a medical practitioner for the deceased person within 2 working days and provided to RBDM within 14 days. A disposal notice must be provided within 7 days by the cemetery or crematorium owner authorised to certify the disposal. The Registrar however, may accept applications made after this period if satisfied that the death happened.

There are two dates attributable to each death registration:

- the date of occurrence (of the death), and

- the date of registration or inclusion on the Queensland register. The registration date is the date at which all data on the death record are finalised.

One dimension of timeliness in death registrations data is therefore the interval between the occurrence and registration of a death (referred to as a registration lag). This can be caused by either a delay in the submission of a completed form to the registry, or a delay in processing the death. Deaths that occur in December are more likely to be registered in the following year. Approximately, 5-6% of Queensland deaths occurring in one year are not registered until the following year or later.

There is evidence to suggest that deaths to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people may have a lower registration rate than deaths of non-Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Lags in registration may affect reliability of measures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths. Caution should be exercised when interpreting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander data, especially with regard to annual change.

### **Method of data collection**

It is usual practice for the funeral director to complete and file the paperwork necessary to register a death on behalf of the family. However, family or friends can independently complete a death registration application form and register with RBDM should this be their preferred option. A doctor's medical certificate cause of death is also required to confirm the medical cause of death and is issued soon after a person has died by the GP or medic who attended (or issued as a result of a coronial investigation).

In 2009, RBDM implemented a secure web-based application to enable all funeral directors to submit death registration information electronically to RBDM. Prior to 2009, all the prescribed approved forms for the death registration process i.e. cause of death certificates, burial or cremation notice and other related documents were hardcopy forms which were posted to RBDM and the death registration information was then transcribed from the hardcopy forms by RBDM resources into RBDM's Vitalware system for the purpose of registration.

At the time of implementation, use of the eDeaths system was not legislated as a mandatory requirement, therefore a number of funeral directors continued to use the manual process. In 2016, amendments were made to the BDMR Act to mandate the collection of prescribed death information to be submitted electronically, unless an exemption is approved by the Registrar. Currently, the percentage of deaths registered electronically from a funeral director is 98%.

In addition to the prescribed death registration application information (in accordance with the BDMR Regulations, *(Part 3 – Deaths)*, other prescribed registration information is provided to RBDM before registration of death is complete:

- *Medical Cause of Death Data (non-reportable death)*: the medical certificate cause of death is a prescribed form which is completed by the doctor authorised to certify the deceased person's death. The medical cause of death information is currently a manual process whereby the triplicate copy of the approved form (Medical Certificate Cause of Death) are handed to the funeral director, the medical practitioner and/or coroner and RBDM as required by law.

- *Cause of Death Data (reportable death)*: Coroners Court Queensland (CCQ) transmits cause of death data (reportable) via a nightly electronic file transfer process directly into RBDM systems for matching into the Vitalware Deaths Module.
- *Disposal Notice*: the cemetery or crematorium owner authorised to certify the disposal (may include regional council and/or privately-owned cemetery i.e. church) provides the notice electronically via the eDisposals system (a similar web application to eDeaths) within 7 days of disposal. This eDisposals data is matched with the eDeath system to validate the deceased's information as matching what the funeral director has provided in the eDeath system.

## ACCURACY

The presence of certain errors (whether systematic or random) may influence accuracy in the Death registration dataset arising from inaccuracies in collecting, recording and processing the data. Every effort is made to minimise these errors by working with information providers to ensure accurate details are provided, undertaking quality checks throughout the data collection process, training of processing staff, and efficient data processing procedures.

Sources of error may include:

- incompleteness of an individual record at a given point in time;
- incompleteness of the dataset (e.g. impact of registration lags, processing lags and deaths that are never registered); and
- inconsistency in the application of questions and/or changes to death registration forms over time.
- the level of specificity and completeness in coronial reports or doctor's findings on the Medical Certificate of Cause of Death.
- extent of coverage of the population (while all deaths are legally required to be registered some cases may not be registered for an extended time).
- extent of information known/supplied by the informant.
- transcription and processing errors by Funeral Directors. RBDM attempts to mitigate this risk through ongoing engagement with Funeral Directors, providing online systems for registration, and detailed documentation and instructions.
- transcription and processing errors by staff. RBDM attempts to mitigate this risk through rigorous staff training, detailed documentation and instructions for processing more complex or difficult cases, and data quality checks.

Whilst it is considered likely that most deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians are registered, a proportion of these deaths are not reported as such by the family, health worker or funeral director during the death registration process. For example, the funeral director may not always directly ask the Indigenous status question of the deceased's relatives and friends. In addition to those deaths recorded as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australian or non-Indigenous, a number of deaths occur each year where Indigenous status is not stated on the death registration form. Data may therefore underestimate the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in Australia.

## Corrections and Amendments

District Court may make orders to register the death of a person or regarding changes to all other registrable death information.

Corrections to the register may be made under a court or tribunal order, following a formal inquiry conducted by the Registrar, on the application of a person who can provide correct information, or if the Registrar determines that the correction would ensure that the registration included the most reliable information about the event. Following a correction, the Registrar may decide also to retain the prior information and reflect both on a certificate.

### **Under-registration**

Information about the deceased is supplied by a relative or other person acquainted with the deceased, or by an official of the institution where the death occurred and may differ from the self-identified Indigenous status of the deceased. Indigenous status is collected on both the Death Registration Form and Medical Certificate of Cause of Death. Propensity to identify the deceased as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australian can be influenced by a range of factors, including:

- who completes the form;
- the perception of why the information is required, and how it will be used;
- whether the funeral director or medical practitioner directly ask the Indigenous status question of the deceased's relatives and friends;
- education programs about reporting as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; and
- cultural aspects and feelings associated with reporting as an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander.

### **COHERENCE**

Compulsory registration of deaths began in 1856, while Queensland was still part of the colony of New South Wales. RBDM hold historical registration records for burials between 1829 and 1856, marine death records until 1920, and death records for service personnel who enlisted in Queensland for World War I and World War II.

Each state or territory Registrar has its own death registration form. Most data items are collected in all states and territories and therefore data at a national level are available for most characteristics. In some cases, different wording of questions asked on the registration form may result in different answers which may influence outcomes regarding the topic of interest.

Changing processes over time and/or across state or territory registries can affect consistency and hence interpretability of statistical output. Changes to methods of data collection and form design across years may also affect reliability of measures and may impact on comparison over time. Statistical concepts for questions are not always suited to the administrative purpose or the means of collection.

### **INTERPRETABILITY**

Deaths data is generally straightforward and easy to interpret. Changes in the numbers of deaths over time can be due to a number of factors including changes in mortality and changes in the size and age/sex structure of the population. Considering deaths information in relation to the size of the relevant population(s) at a given time period should therefore be considered.

## ACCESSIBILITY

The use and disclosure of personal information is closely controlled under the BDMR Act to protect the privacy of individuals and protect against the risk that information will be misused. The BDMR Act provides that the Registrar can release certain information held by RBDM in the following circumstances:

- in response to a request, made in writing, by a person or other entity, noting that for non-historical information, the Registrar may refuse the request if the person does not have an adequate reason for obtaining the information (see Certificate Access Policy);
- under written policies maintained by the Registrar;
- under an approved arrangement (such as an agreement or Memorandum of Understanding) entered into with an entity for the provision of information in a register, that is deemed to be in the **public interest**, including information in bulk or historical or genealogical information;
- under a reciprocal administrative arrangement with another registering authority e.g. an RBDM of another state or territory; and
- under an agreement with the Principal Commissioner of the Queensland Family and Child Commission, the Chief Executive (Child Safety), the Chief Executive (Adoptions) and the Health Ombudsman in relation to specific functions undertaken by those agencies.

RBDM is committed to respecting, protecting and promoting human rights. Under the *Human Rights Act 2019*, RBDM has an obligation to act and make decisions in a way that is compatible with human rights and when making a decision, to give proper consideration to human rights. When deciding about the use and disclosure of information under the BDMR Act, decision-makers must comply with these obligations.

### **Privacy and Security**

When giving a person or entity information, or access to information contained in a register, the Registrar must consider the need to protect people to whom the information relates from unjustified intrusion on their privacy. This may involve imposing conditions on the release of the information.

### **Certificate Access Policy**

RBDM's Certificate Access Policy sets out who may obtain information under the BDMR Act, including community members who apply for information or a life event certificate. This policy deals with access to both historical and non-historical information. The current Certificate Access Policy is focussed on factors for determining whether a person has an adequate reason for seeking the requested certificate or information and setting out the specific requirements to accompany a request by specific individuals and entities. It does not provide a framework for the release of information where the Registrar enters into an arrangement, which is in the public interest, with an entity.

### **Historical Information**

As it is recognised that the information held by RBDM is of interest to family members, historians, genealogists, and family history researchers, the BDMR Act provides open access to **historical information** after a certain period has passed. This means that anyone can access historical information after making an application and paying the applicable fee. Historical information means

information in a register that relates to an event that was registered before the following prescribed periods of time:

- for a death—30 years before the date of the application.

### **Non-Historical Information**

In the case of individual one-off requests for **non-historical information\***, such as a request for a copy of a life event certificate or information about an event that is in a register or a copy of a source document, the guiding principle, under the BDMR Act, is that information generally should only be released if the applicant has an adequate reason for obtaining it.

(\*Note: Non-historical information means information in a register other than historical information).

In deciding whether an applicant has an adequate reason for obtaining the requested information, the Registrar must have regard to:

- the relationship, if any, between the applicant and the person to whom the information relates;
- the reason that the applicant wants the information;
- the use to be made of the information;
- the age of the entry;
- the contents of the entry or source document;
- the sensitivity of the information; and
- any other relevant factors.

The BDMR Act authorises the Registrar to enter into an arrangement (agreement or MOU) with an entity to provide information **in a register**, including information in bulk or historical or genealogical information, but only if this is **in the public interest**.

RBDM ensures these agreements contain provisions to:

- protect the identity of individuals for example by imposing restrictions on the information able to be included in any publication and limiting who can access the data;
- only release the minimal amount of data needed to meet the objective of the agreement;
- ensure clearly defined, adequate and auditable data security arrangements to address data transmission methods, data storage, and individual and organisational access controls;
- address compliance with information security standards and privacy legislation;
- address data disposal and retention arrangements; and
- either restrict the provision of the data to a third party or clearly set out any third party use of the data and the conditions and arrangements for this use.

### **Retention and Disposal**

RBDM, as part of Department of Justice and Attorney-General, is subject to the *Public Records Act 2002* (Public Records Act) in relation to the management and preservation of its records (for example, RBDM is subject to requirements under the Public Records Act around the retention and disposal of its records). The Public Records Act also sets out an access regime for access to records after certain periods of time, which is administered by the State Archivist. However, it is important to note that the BDMR Act provides that despite the Public Records Act, the Registrar retains control over access to any information supplied or records maintained under the BDMR Act.

### ***Australian Coordinating Registry***

RBDM is the Australian Coordinating Registry (ACR) for the national Cause of Death Unit Record File (COD URF). The ACR coordinates the approval and released of COD URF files on behalf of the data custodians – Australian Registrars of Births, Deaths and Marriages, State/Chief Coroners and the National Coronial Information System (NCIS).

If aggregate or summary Cause of Death data is required, please contact one of our partner agencies:

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS)  
ABS National Information and Referral Service on 1300 135 070 or go to [inquiries \(www4.abs.gov.au/web/survey.nsf/inquiryform/\)](http://www4.abs.gov.au/web/survey.nsf/inquiryform/).
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW)  
The AIHW maintains the National Mortality Database (NMD) and the National Death Index (NDI). The NMD is used for statistical reporting on causes of death and the NDI enables data linkage activity for health and medical research relating to mortality. If you are interested in obtaining more information about the data available in the NDI and eligibility requirements, please check the AIHW website for more information at [www.aihw.gov.au/deaths/](http://www.aihw.gov.au/deaths/) or contact the AIHW at [deaths@aihw.gov.au](mailto:deaths@aihw.gov.au).

Please note that aggregate or summary Cause of Death data is not available from the ACR.

The COD URF is only available to approved applicants where its use is for research or statistical purposes that are consistent with the following principles:

- The purpose of data access is for the public good, which may include research that benefits the community.
- The data released must be appropriately managed by approved users to protect individuals from unreasonable intrusion on their privacy.

All applications for research (per project) or the creation of a master linkage file must be supported by a current Human Research Ethics Committee approval.

Before completing one of the COD URF applications, please contact the ACR to discuss the availability of COD URF and your requirements:

Queensland Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Australian Coordinating Registry (for COD URF): [bdmcodurf@justice.qld.gov.au](mailto:bdmcodurf@justice.qld.gov.au)

Fact of Death File contact: [bdmfod@justice.qld.gov.au](mailto:bdmfod@justice.qld.gov.au)

All other Queensland data requests contact: [CRMData@justice.qld.gov.au](mailto:CRMData@justice.qld.gov.au)

Please describe the information you want as clearly and with as much detail as possible. We will acknowledge your inquiry as soon as possible.