January 27, 1989

Death Forms in 2 States Ask About Tobacco Use

By JANE GROSS, SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES

LEAD: Oregon and Utah have become the first states to ask doctors to specify on death certificates whether tobacco use contributed to death, a change that the American Medical Association has urged other areas to imitate.

Oregon and Utah have become the first states to ask doctors to specify on death certificates whether tobacco use contributed to death, a change that the American Medical Association has urged other areas to imitate.

Opponents of smoking welcomed the new questions on smoking that began appearing on Oregon and Utah death certificates Jan. 1, saying the change would have powerful symbolic value and improve data collection on the correlation between smoking and health.

"It sends a very strong message," said John M. Pinney, executive director of Harvard University's Institute for the Study of Smoking Behavior and Policy. "This is another institutional recognition of the role of tobacco in deaths. For people on the borderline, who still don't believe that the evidence is all in, this is a signal that we're not kidding."

Representatives of the tobacco industry, on the other hand, argue that the change is meaningless. "Absent an autopsy, you don't know what caused a person's death," said Walker Merryman, a vice president at the Tobacco Institute, a trade association. "A death certificate is an estimate, a guess." Encouragement to Doctors

Mr. Pinney said the change might make doctors more aggressive about urging patients to give up smoking. "Some physicians are still reluctant to involve themselves in life style decisions of their patients," he said. "Maybe checking this box once or twice will make them take a more proactive role."

The change could also assist in damage suits by smokers and their families against tobacco companies, said Richard A. Daynard, chairman of the Tobacco Products Liability Project in Boston, which encourages such litigation. Mr. Daynard said a death certificate citing tobacco would be impressive trial testimony, although not conclusive. Moreover, he said, "this will be useful in recruiting plaintiffs."

Registering deaths, like that for births, is a state task, although the National Center for Health Statistics recommends a standard set of questions and encourages uniformity by buying data from the states. And the Federal model now includes a filled-out example naming smoking as a factor in the death.

In the latest Federal report on the health consequences of smoking, C. Everett Koop, the Surgeon General, said cigarette smoking was responsible for 1 in 6 preventable deaths in the United States, or a total of 390,000, in 1985, despite the sharp decline in smoking in recent years. Tobacco Cited Rarely

Since the first Surgeon General's report on smoking in 1964, the percentage of American adults who smoke has declined to 29 from 40. Both Oregon and Utah have smaller percentages of smokers than the country as a whole: 22 percent in Oregon and 15.4 percent in Utah, where the prevailing Mormon religion outlaws smoking.

Oregon moved to revise its death certificates after health officials noticed in 1987 that tobacco use was cited in only 2 percent of the nearly 3,000 deaths attributed to lung cancer or chronic pulmonary disease. The department sent out letters to all the doctors who had signed these death certificates, asking whether smoking was a factor. Nearly 80 percent said it was.

Oregon health officials hope the new death certificates will help draw a clearer demographic picture of who is smoking. "Then we can target our public health programs better," said Joyce Grant-Worly, the supervisor of the statistical unit in the Oregon Health Division.

In Utah health officials hope that local data will be "more meaningful and motivational" than national statistics in dissuading smokers, said John Brockert, the state's director of vital records. But Mr. Brockert said there was concern that the experiment might be compromised by physicians under pressure from Mormon next of kin who did not want it known that the dead relative had smoked. Official Tells of Father's Death

George A. Gay, an official at the National Center for Health Statistics, said he was concerned that the new questions in Oregon and Utah might scramble the national data rather than clarify it. "A little more discussion might have been useful" before making the change, he said.

But he agreed that doctors rarely mentioned smoking on death certificates unless forced to do so. As an example, Mr. Gay referred to his father's death a year ago of lung cancer, in North Carolina, a tobacco-growing state.