

OVERVIEW OF THE NATIONAL DEATH INDEX

Robert Bilgrad, National Center for Health Statistics

The National Death Index (NDI) is a central, computerized index of death record information compiled from magnetic tapes submitted under contractual arrangements to NCHS by State vital statistics offices. These tapes (beginning with deaths occurring in 1979) contain a standard set of identifying data for each decedent. The data are used in searches of the NDI to identify and locate death records filed in the State offices. The NDI enables investigators conducting statistical studies to determine if persons in their studies may have died; if so, the Index provides the names of the States where the deaths occurred, the corresponding death certificate numbers, and the dates of death. The NDI user can then make the necessary arrangements with the appropriate State offices to procure copies of death certificates or specific statistical information such as cause of death.

The NDI currently facilitates prospective studies in medical and health research; however, as more years of death are added to the file, this new service also will be of tremendous benefit to retrospective studies. Investigators have expressed great enthusiasm for the establishment and continued operation of the NDI program because it reduces the time, expense, and effort involved in State file searches. In the past, investigators conducting both prospective and retrospective studies have often found it necessary to contact all or most State vital statistics offices, asking each to search its files to see if a death record may have been filed for any individual in the entire study group. Such studies frequently include thousands of subjects and cover long periods of time because the case fatality rates may be small and because the latent period between exposure and onset of disease may be long. Furthermore, State vital statistics offices cannot always promptly undertake large file searches because of staff limitations.

NCHS will provide the NDI user with an indication that a particular individual in the users's file has been involved in a possible match with one or more records in the NDI file. It is the user's responsibility to (a) assess the quality of each possible NDI record match that occurs, (b) determine which of the NDI records appears most likely to be associated with the person under investigation when there is more than one possible match, and (c) obtain copies of relevant death certificates or specific death record information from the appropriate State vital statistics offices.

Death registration is a State responsibility; death certificates are filed in the States in which the deaths occur. Each State vital statistics office retains the authority to furnish NDI users with copies of death certificates or statistical data from death certificates in accordance

with its legislation, regulations, and policies.

Beginning with deaths occurring in 1979, the NDI file contains death record information for all 50 States, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands. The data base management system in which the data are stored is updated annually. Approximately 2 million death records are added to the NDI file each year. All State data for a given calendar year are expected to be received, processed, and added to the national file approximately 12 to 15 months after the end of the calendar year. Death records for 1979, 1980 and 1981 are currently available for searches. Records for 1982 should be available in the first quarter of 1984.

Investigators interested in using the NDI are encouraged to make every effort to collect as many of the NDI data items as possible. The following group of data items is most important because various combinations of these items are used for searching the NDI file to determine possible matches: first and last name, father's surname, social security number, and month and year of birth. As a minimum, each request must include the person's first and last name and either the person's social security number or month and year of birth. A second group of data items is used to assist the investigator in assessing the quality of possible matches that occur: middle initial, day of birth, state of birth, state of residence, sex, race, marital status, and age at death (actual or estimated).

The NDI may only be used for statistical purposes in medical and health research. In order to use the NDI, an investigator must submit a completed application form to NCHS. After being notified that the request has been approved, the investigator then prepares and submits the names (and related data) to be used for a search of the NDI file. Fees for this service consist of a basic service charge of \$100 plus a 10 cents per record charge for each record submitted to NCHS on magnetic tape.

The NDI User's Manual explains how the NDI functions, the restrictions on the use of the NDI, how applications for use of the service are submitted to NCHS, how lists of individuals are submitted for searches of the NDI file, the results users can expect to receive, and NCHS charges for NDI services. To receive copies of the manual and application form contact:

National Death Index
Division of Vital Statistics
National Center for Health Statistics
Room 1-44, Center Building
3700 East-West Highway
Hyattsville, Maryland 20782