

Comparisons of National Records of Scotland (NRS) Data with NHS Data

Although we are not aware of any rigorous evaluation of the quality of the National Records of Scotland (NRS), formerly the General Register Office for Scotland (GROS)'s data on deaths, in comparison with NHS data for the same people, there are indications that the NRS data are of a higher quality.

1. In February 2010, someone at NHS Fife informed Scottish Government Health Department about differences between NRS and NHS data that had been identified in work on the Better Together survey, which covered patients who had been discharged from certain wards/hospitals in the past year or so. The NRS data on deaths were being used to try to exclude from the sample people who had since died. NHS Fife matched its data and NRS's data twice: once using Surname, Initial of Forename, Date of Birth and Sex; and once using Surname, Initial of Forename and Postcode. About 250 matches were made. NHS Fife found that there were several cases for which the Date of Birth or the Sex differed between its records and the NRS data. When these were investigated, only one was found to be due to an error in the NRS data (the Registrar had recorded the wrong sex when the death was registered, and it was not picked up at the time by the Registrar or the Informant (both of whom signed the page that was printed for the register). In cases where the Date of Birth differed, NRS checked its images of the people's original birth register entries and found that its data were correct. While one cannot generalise from a small-scale haphazard sample, it is reassuring to note that NRS's records of around 250 deaths contained only one incorrect Sex, and no incorrect Dates of Birth.
2. A presentation given at a meeting, in February 2010, between NRS and NHS Information Services Division users of NRS included, in slides on:
 - Cancer Surveillance, a statement that all deaths provided to customers are NRS deaths rather than deaths from cancer registry. The Information Services Division (ISD) analyst concerned explained that ISD believed that the NRS data were more reliable than the information that was
 - ISD's National Drug-Related Deaths database, statements that NRS records would be used for data confirmation (e.g. has ISD got data for all the drug-related deaths that it should have?) and data supplementation (to find data that are missing from the NDRD records);
 - Stillbirths and Infant Deaths, a statement about end of year checking, to ensure numbers agree with NRS.

Again, while one cannot generalise from statements about three particular kinds of deaths, it is reassuring to note that ISD regarded the NRS data for all cases as being more reliable than the information that it got from NHS sources.