

Home Funerals—A Revived Tradition

Before funeral homes there were “undertakers” in 19th century America. Undertakers sometimes were carpenters or furniture store owners, who undertook the side business of building caskets. And before that each family took care of its own deaths, with the menfolk making coffins and the women washing and laying out the deceased in the parlor where friends and neighbors would come to pay their respects. It is still done this way in most of the world outside North America. Now there is a growing attempt to return to the tradition of home funerals.

Home funerals and family care of bodies is perfectly legal in California, despite what you might be told by funeral home and crematory personnel.

Embalming is not required in California, nor does it take a licensed mortician to transport a body, nor do most cemeteries require a casket. The latter would go against the religious tenets of Moslems and Jews who often bury bodies in direct contact with the earth and without embalming.

In the *California Guide for Funeral and Cemetery Purchases*, prepared by the Department of Consumer Affairs, Funeral and Cemetery Bureau:

“The law does not prohibit consumers from preparing their own dead for disposition. If you choose to do this you must file with the local registrar a properly completed Certificate of Death, signed by the attending physician or coroner and obtain a Permit for

Disposition before any disposition can occur. You must also provide a casket or suitable container and make arrangements directly with the cemetery or crematory.”

California Health and Safety Code Section 102780 allows persons acting in lieu of licensed funeral directors to handle funeral arrangements. This person may be a family member, DPAHC (Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care) assigned Health Care Agent, or a legal guardian.

Who Are the Pioneers?

- People who are more independent and don't need a lot of support.
- People who realize that death is a natural part of life. They are more curious than afraid of death.
- They value the personalization possible by the after-death care of a loved one.
- Perhaps the deceased person requests it, wanting to die at home and prepare for their final exit amidst people they trust, rather than with strangers.
- Families who want to retain control of this final journey.
- They have heard that it helps in grieving process, giving closure.
- Some want to be physically involved and be active participants.
- They are turned off by commercialization and impersonality of funeral homes.
- They will probably save money (no embalming, expensive casket, or use of middleman services). Can use a shroud, blanket, cardboard box, handmade casket, etc.

Planning Ahead Helps

The family can agree ahead of time who is to direct things and who will do which tasks. Lacking a family, the dying person can choose an agent under a Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care to take charge of disposition.

The dying person can write out his or her after-death wishes to help the family or agent. A Funeral Consumers Alliance planning form or the “Before I Go, You Should Know” booklet in the FCA plastic pouch would do nicely.

If desired, the dying person could arrange for a “Payable Upon Death” trust account at a bank naming the agent as the person to receive the money (corpus) to pay for the anticipated last expenses.

Decide what to put in a newspaper obituary, and what to put on a cemetery monument (if desired).

Find a willing crematory operator or cemetery that will work with the agent. Obtain and fill in the forms as far as possible, and read guidelines and rules.

Find or make the burial or cremation box and decorate if desired. FCA has plans for a plywood box. Cardboard boxes can be ordered online or purchased at a local mortuary or casket outlet for \$35 to \$100. They are about 6'2" long and hold 225 pounds, more if with a wooden base.

Make sure hospice, hospital, nursing home, or all people at home know that this will be a home-directed funeral, so no one accidentally has the body picked up by a funeral

home. If the death is unexpected, the medical examiner must be notified and perhaps an autopsy will be needed. Make sure the coroner knows that someone in the family is acting as funeral director and to call that person when the body can be released.

How It Is Different

The rites can be as spiritual or religious as wanted. Use scented candles, flag, music, flowers, incense, poetry, readings, speakers, videos, pictures, mementos.

The vigil, visitation, or wake can occur at the hours or days desired, be simple or elaborate to fit the personality of the deceased.

Involve the people you want, who knew and loved the deceased.

Make and/or decorate the casket as you wish, inside and outside. Put personal belongings or notes in the casket if desired.

Dry ice will be used for preservation, rather than embalming.

Sometimes the family wants to dig the grave themselves. Consult the cemetery.

Transportation

Use someone's van, pickup truck, or SUV. May need two or more people to carry the body and container. Handles or cut-outs make it easier to move.

Arrange to pick up ashes after cremation. Can scatter at sea 500 yards or more from shore, or on land with permission of land owner, inter at a cemetery, or keep in an urn at home. The urn may be handmade or purchased.

Preservation and Care

Wash the body with warm water and soap; clean and trim nails; shampoo and arrange the hair; close eyes and mouth; some liquid might come through orifices after death and pads may be necessary.

Massaging with oil is an option. Dress the body or wrap in a shroud.



Decide whether you want some lining and pillow in the container; arrange body, paying attention to hair, face, and hands.

Use dry ice to keep the body fresh for several days.

For cremation, make sure all contents of box are combustible. Pacemakers have to be removed because batteries would explode and damage the retort, but you can leave the artificial joints and other surgery miscellany.

Legal Matters and Paperwork

If there is time to plan ahead, the sick person could compile a list of all known sources of death benefits, location of current and unpaid bills, key persons in his or her life and their contact information, combinations and passwords, location of important papers, and other information that would help the one administering the estate and/or funeral.

What you need to know for death certificate: address, when the person moved to this county and to California, names and birth places of decedent and each parent,

military service dates and DD-214 discharge number (there could be death benefits coming), occupation, education level, cemetery or final disposition plans, social security number, birth and death dates).

Pick up blank death certificate from your county public health department, type in the known information in black ink, and take to the person's physician for him or her to fill in cause of death and sign. (\$12-\$14 each)

Your county will also require you to purchase a permit for disposition or burial whether you use a cemetery or a crematory. This is also obtained at the county public health department (\$11) after you have the certified death certificate.

The crematory or cemetery will need to see a copy of the approved death certificate and permit for disposition before accepting the body. You will need additional certified death certificates to collect death benefits and transfer property and accounts.

Resources

Local Funeral Consumers Alliance affiliate, find at www.funerals.org.

FCA Inc. (www.funerals.org); 333 Patchen Dr., South Burlington, VT, 05403, (800) 765-0107. Joshua Slocum, Exec. Dir.

Final Passages, Jerri Lyons, Director, P.O. Box 1721, Sebastopol, CA 95473, (707) 824-0268; finalpassages@softcom.net, www.finalpassages.org. Consulting, publications.

Crossings: Caring for Our Own at Death, crossingcare@earthlink.net; 7108 Holly Avenue, Takoma Park, MD 20912; (301) 523-3033 phone consultations to individuals by appointment; in-service presentations to hospice, clergy, and social workers. Resource Guide: \$55.

Funeral Ethics Organization, Lisa Carlson, author of *Caring for the Dead, Your Final Act of Love*, Upper Access Publishers, \$29.99, (800) 310-8320.

PBS Documentary video: "A Family Undertaking."

Nancy Jewel Poer, *Living Into Dying: A Journal of Spiritual, Practical Deathcare for Family and Community*, \$23

FAMILY-DIRECTED

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