

Mortuary Service

What Happens Following the Death?

Steven Barton

January 9, 2013

Hospice's objectives do not terminate with the death of the patient, nor does funeral service terminate after the disposition of the body.

Some Objectives of Hospice

- **Efficient control of pain.**
Pain is the most feared symptom of any illness.
- **Control of symptoms** such as nausea, delirium, anorexia, dry mouth and eyes, incontinence, and accompanying secondary conditions such as bed sores.
- **Management of psychological issues** such as depression, anxiety, fear, and loneliness.
- **Concern for spiritual and existential issues** that are often ignored during a robust life but typically become more important during the frailty of terminal illness.
- **Helping family members** deal with an impending death.
- Make **bereavement counseling** available to family members as needed.



Mutual Concern, Cooperation, & Care

Because of the close relationship that hospice workers develop with the families they serve, they are a trustworthy source of information about funeral directors who share their mutual concern for the family's welfare. Funeral directors value that trust and work hard to provide the high level of care and compassion that the family experienced with hospice.

Donald Schumacher, president and CEO of the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization states, "There are no better providers more skilled at providing palliative care at the end of life than hospice professionals and the dying deserve the best care that our society can offer." Barton's corollary to this statement is that the living deserve the best mortuary services that our society can offer.

What Happens Following the Death?

Death sets into motion a number of events, some of which are necessary and a few that are elective. The funeral director has a moral obligation to compassionately help the family do what is necessary and help them to choose the elective services wisely. The mechanical disposition of the body and the attendant legal requirements are necessary and routine. The family's emotional and religious needs are the primary focus of funeral service, while efficiently and seamlessly performing the logistics of disposition.

Steps in the Disposition of Body

- Body is removed from the place of death and placed in refrigeration pending the gathering of information required for the death certificate. ("DC") (RCW 70.58.150-190)
- DC delivered to certifying authority (Physician, ARNP, PA, or Medical Examiner) for signature. Washington is a "permit first state." A filed DC is required before disposition.
- Medical Certifiers for Death Certificates and Funeral Directors examine DC to assure compliance with guidelines and with the Death with Dignity Act (RCW 70.245)
- Next-of-kin verifies that the personal information contained on the DC is correct.
- The funeral director or person having the right to control the disposition of the human remains under RCW 68.50.160 shall file the certificate of death or fetal death within three business days after the occurrence is known. It is difficult to comply with the three day rule, primarily because of delays obtaining a signature from certifying authorities.
- The King County medical examiner requires review of the DC and a \$50 fee before it is filed.
- The family usually has decided upon the method of disposition, burial or cremation, before the death has occurred or shortly thereafter in the case of a sudden unexpected death.
- The back of the DC is the Burial Transit Permit, Washington State's permission to bury or cremate the individual.

Choice of Disposition

Increasingly people are choosing forms of disposition that deviate significantly from what is considered a traditional burial, i.e.: display of the embalmed remains in a casket during a period of visitation, followed by a funeral service in a church, a procession to and burial in a cemetery, often accompanied by an additional ceremony at the grave site.

While it is often difficult to know all reasons why a family chooses a particular form of disposition, some reasons advanced include:

- Going along with the crowd. Cremation is clearly a more economical solution but its acceptance is greater even among religious people when it is widely accepted by the general community.
- Cost. In most large cities, cemetery space is becoming scarce and costs have escalated, making cremation an attractive low cost alternative.
- In rural areas where towns have low cost municipal cemeteries and there is only one funeral home with no crematory, it is not unusual to see a much higher burial rate.
- Personal preferences. A family that might otherwise chose a different form of disposition usually complies with the wishes of the deceased, raising the question of why that choice was made.
- Idealistic motives like concern for the environment.
- Motives dictated by religious belief.

Cremation

Cremation in most places in the United States is carried out in a high temperature (ca. 900 °C) gas fired furnace called a retort. The retort reduces the body to bone fragments composed primarily of calcium phosphate. Most retorts now have adjustable control systems that monitor the furnace during cremation. When the cremation process is complete, the furnace automatically shuts down. The time required for cremation varies with the weight of the body and may be as fast as one hour per 45 kilograms (99 lb) of body weight. Two hours is a common length of time.



When the cremation is complete, the bones are cooled, pieces of metal such as implants are removed, and the bone fragments are mechanically reduced to a small size and placed in a container along with the metal identification disc that accompanied the body during the cremation process. Chapter 98-80 of the Washington Administrative Code (WAC) establishes the rules of procedure for cremation.

Burial



Swiss grave marker with 7 family members buried in a common plot

Burial has been the traditional form of disposition in Europe and the Americas, although there are significant differences in the economics of how it is practiced, particularly in the United States. In the U.S. a grave site is considered the property of the deceased, “guaranteed” by some form of perpetual care fund or maintained by the taxing authority of local government. In most other countries, the grave is the resting place for an indeterminate period depending on many factors,



View of Cemetery near Basel, Switzerland

not the least of which is the family's ability to keep up with periodic payments to maintain the grave. Land reuse is common in Europe and South America where many generations share a common grave. If a family line comes to an end and payments stop, the grave is reused by others.

In the United States, particularly in large metropolitan areas, many of the cemeteries are owed by Service Corporation International (SCI) whose commercial existence rests solidly on its financial obligations to shareholders. Prices for grave sites have climbed sharply over the last twenty years. Municipalities also maintain cemeteries but many of them are reaching their capacity and difficult economic times leave them strapped for cash to maintain even basic services, let alone expanding a cemetery onto what may be expensive ground.

U.S. cemeteries commonly require a vault or grave liner that prevents the earth from collapsing when the casket and remains disintegrate. This requirement alone can add \$500 to several thousand dollars to the cost of a grave.



Sign in Swiss cemetery warning of instability of the soil over the grave

When the casket and vault are placed in the ground, cemeteries charge “opening” and “closing” fees, basically for digging the grave and covering it over. Most people want some form of memorial headstone or plaque, the cost of which is not insignificant. Cemeteries may then add setting fees and inspection fees when a headstone is installed over the grave, particularly when the headstone is purchased from a third party. Funeral directors should be advocates for the family when they deal with cemeteries.

Many people do not realize that a cemetery and funeral home are separate businesses even though many funeral homes are closely associated with cemeteries. There is no requirement that funeral services must be purchased from the funeral home associated with a cemetery in order to be buried at that cemetery. Significant savings can be realized by obtaining services from funeral establishments not associated with a cemetery. A funeral home associated with a cemetery will rarely if ever tell the family of a veteran that burial plots are free of cost in veterans' cemeteries.

Deciding upon the Method of Disposition

Stephen Prothero, professor in the Department of Religion at Boston University, wisely points out, “whether to bury or to burn is ... no trivial matter. It touches on issues as important as perceptions of the self, attitudes toward the body, views of history, styles of ritual, and beliefs in God and the afterlife.”

Difficult decisions should not be made during the stress and grief following a death. Hospice tries to encourage the discussion of funeral arrangements before the death occurs but many individuals do not utilize hospice services until the final days of their illness, effectively reducing contact time with the family. Funeral Service providers also recommend making decisions early and encourage pre-planning to eliminate making difficult decisions at a time of stress.

Unfortunately pre-payment, as opposed to pre-planning, has become a big part of the marketing strategy of some funeral establishments and people find themselves locked into arrangements that an elderly parent paid for thinking that they were saving the family problems later on. Occasionally such arrangements work out well, particularly when the parents and children make the decisions jointly and the parents' desires are well communicated. All too often, however, prepayment locks the family into a situation that precludes changes and impairs their bargaining ability.

Sometimes the arrangements are made years in advance by younger "take charge" parents. Then when the inevitable time of death occurs, the family has no recollection of a contract that may be worth thousands of dollars, but goes unclaimed.

Funeral Arrangements

The first order of business when funeral arrangements are made is to verify the accuracy of the information on the death certificate. Then attention turns to the method of disposition, followed by funeral rites or other activities.

In the Seattle area people are noticeably more creative in their choice of funeral rites and other activities.

These activities range from cremation as the method of disposition with no accompanying ceremony to elaborate church services and burial following a large funeral procession to the cemetery. Because Washington law is sensitive to the beliefs and customs of citizens, almost any funeral rite may be observed with little or no impediment from authorities. The funeral director's responsibility is to assist the family in carrying out their wishes and eliminate obstacles whenever possible.

A fairly common funeral is a throwback to what used to be the norm, the home funeral. The body is kept at home often cooled by ice, while family members engage in activities of their choosing. At the appropriate time, the funeral director assists with transporting the body for final disposition.

Embalming is not required by law. When a body is to be transported to a distant location, the common carrier or authorities on the receiving end may require embalming. Embalming facilitates the extended display of the body for public viewing by making it easier to control odors and to help makeup remain stable. Embalming fluid as used in the U.S. contains a mixture of formaldehyde, glutaraldehyde and/or phenol, dyes, glycerol, and methanol plus other minor ingredients. It fixes the tissue and slows natural decomposition. It is not used as a public health measure but is purely for the convenience of making the body temporarily more presentable.

In Washington State there are separate licenses for funeral directors and embalmers.

Definitions

- **Direct Cremation** - A “direct cremation” is a disposition of human remains by cremation, without formal viewing, visitation, or ceremony with the body present.
- **Immediate burial** - An “immediate burial” is a disposition of human remains by burial, without formal viewing, visitation, or ceremony with the body present, except for a graveside service.
- **Memorial service** -A “memorial service” is a ceremony commemorating the deceased without the body present.
- **Funeral ceremony** - A “funeral ceremony” is a service commemorating the deceased with the body present.
- **Outer burial container** -An “outer burial container” is any container which is designed for placement in the grave around the casket including, but not limited to, containers commonly known as burial vaults, grave boxes, and grave liners.
- **Casket** - A “casket” is a rigid container which is designed for the encasement of human remains and which is usually constructed of wood, metal, fiberglass, plastic, or like material, and ornamented and lined with fabric.

Caveat Emptor (Let the buyer beware)

Unfortunately the sale of funeral goods such as burial containers, caskets, and urns has become a major profit center for many funeral establishments and up-selling is common. Ethical funeral directors have a burden to honestly represent the features of funeral goods and services and scrupulously avoid taking advantage of vulnerable grieving people to sell more expensive items than an informed unemotional person would willingly purchase.

Caskets and burial containers do not appreciably preserve the body after death. Caskets with a rubber gasket, so called sealing caskets, simply change the way a body decomposes by limiting oxygen and reducing moisture. With a few exceptions, inexpensive caskets can look as nice and function as well as their more expensive counterparts. They equally serve the purpose of transporting the remains.



Low cost Gemini metal casket by
Batesville



It is difficult to make claims of superiority about urns to hold cremated remains but some cemeteries and columbaria claim that an urn must conform to their standards for them to accept it at their facility. As private businesses, they have that right but their refusal to accept a plain plastic urn that will neither deteriorate, rust, nor leak is simply a way to sell an overpriced brass or copper

box. By knowing in advance what the requirements are for placing remains in a cemetery, the conforming container can easily be bought from a third party at considerable cost savings.

Bereavement

People cope with the loss of a loved one in different ways. Most cope well while a small number have severe grief and may require treatment. Factors that affect how people cope with the loss of a loved one include:

- The personality of the person who is grieving.
- The relationship with the person who died.
- The loved one's end of life experience and the way their disease progressed.
- The grieving person's coping skills and mental health history.
- The amount of family or community support the grieving person has.
- The grieving person's cultural and religious background.
- The grieving person's social and financial position.

Generally mental health professionals and support groups are best prepared to help a grieving person. While some funeral directors are very compassionate and are able to help persons through short bouts of grief, prolonged and disabling grief should be referred to a recognized grief counseling program such as those maintained by hospice and hospital organizations.



About Steven Barton



Steven Barton is a 1992 graduate of the San Francisco College of Mortuary Science and is a Washington licensed embalmer and funeral director.

Before moving to Seattle in 1997, he worked at family owned funeral homes in Pocatello, Idaho and St. George, Utah. Coming from a background where the local funeral directors knew the families they served, Steven was accustomed to a high standard of care where the needs of the families came first. After seven years at large corporate funeral providers in the Seattle area, he decided that he could make a difference in the way funeral service is provided locally. In 2004, he left the corporate world and

founded Barton Family Funeral, now with offices in Seattle, Kirkland, and Renton.