

CARE AFTER DEATH

ideas, concerns and expectations

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background

- The report Funeral Experts by Experience indicated that the right sort of contact with the body after death was one of the five 'funeral satisfaction' factors.
- But there is little understanding about people's ideas, concerns, and expectations about how people are cared for after death.
- And there is limited information about funeral directors' views and current practices

method

- Survey of 271 independent funeral directors about their views and practice regarding care after death.
- Exploratory interviews with 30 participants who agreed to talk to us about their funeral experiences.
- Review of sector policy and training documentation.
- All the research focussed on pre-pandemic experiences.
- Ethical oversight from an advisory committee including academics and industry bodies.

RESULTS

POLICY, GUIDANCE, AND TRAINING

Policy documents showed some internal inconsistencies regarding care after death and family consent for some procedures.

Training referred to aspects of care after death but consistent and specific practical instruction for areas such as "first offices" was not always well defined.

Care after death was usually considered within the framework of "transparency". The concept of informed consent may be a better approach to ensure that families are fully engaged with decision-making.

EXPERTS BY EXPERIENCE: IDEAS, CONCERNS, AND EXPECTATIONS

The people we interviewed tended to assume that funeral directors are trained professionals within a regulated industry and follow external validated processes and procedures for care after death.

People had very individual needs about spending time with the person who had died and wanted different levels of information and involvement in decisions around how someone is cared for by funeral directors.

Some people found it profoundly meaningful to be involved in physical care after death whereas for others it was not - highlighting the need for funeral directors to be responsive rather than prescriptive.

FUNERAL DIRECTORS VIEWS AND PRACTICE

There was huge variation in practice regarding how funeral directors physically care for people after death - particularly in what procedures they will undertake prior to discussion with the family. Note that, as the report was being written, the two principal trade bodies representing funeral directors were reviewing their codes of practice.

Funeral directors demonstrated some uncertainty around the way that statutory processes (such as death registration) impact on how care is provided.

There was a high degree of variability between funeral directors regarding the degree to which families were involved in conversations about physical care.

Funeral directors reported a range of opinions about family involvement in physical aspects of care.

key points

- **There is a gap between public expectation of standard professional practice and the degree to which funeral directors' own discretion dictates how the body is cared for after death.**
- **There is a lack of clarity about permissions for technical procedures (first offices, embalming) and best practice regarding care after death.**
- **The concept of informed consent may be a useful frame to guide conversations around care after death.**
- **Although needs differ, the opportunity to discuss and have contact with the body after death remains important for many people - may have implications for growth of direct cremation.**
- **Raising awareness about care options (ie, helping to wash or dress the body) will be beneficial for people who wish to have greater involvement in care after death.**
- **Creating opportunities for people to consider and express their wishes regarding care after death is likely to improve funeral satisfaction.**



RECOMMENDATIONS

- Use principles underpinning 'informed consent' to frame decision-making about care after death.
- Encourage reflective practice at sector and individual funeral director level to clarify and continually improve current practice.
- Create gentle and empowering public information to make conversations about care after death more accessible.

