

INFORMATION ON EMBALMING

Embalming is defined as the preservation of a body from decay, originally carried out with the use of spices and more recently through arterial injection of embalming fluid.

Historically, the process is identified with the Egyptians, and the mummification of bodies. In fact, this complicated and extreme method was abandoned, although in recent centuries, ways of preserving bodies has received considerable attention. Varying levels of success were achieved but probably due to expense, they were utilised by very few people.

In the past thirty years, the commercial promotion of embalming has greatly increased. There has also been an increase in the use of unqualified embalmers over this period. Embalming is particularly evident amongst larger commercial funeral directors in urban locations. Conversely, the process is less common in rural areas, where small funeral directing businesses predominate. This is, in part, due to them lacking the facilities necessary to embalm the body. Also, some funeral directors appear to oppose the process.

The current use of the word “embalming” is misleading. The process is generally referred to as cosmetic embalming. It is used to improve the visual appearance of the body, and to prevent deterioration in the period leading up to the funeral. It has no long term preservative value and cannot be compared with the Egyptian concept of preserving bodies.

The decision as to the merits of embalming must lie with the individual although a number of issues should be considered:

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The embalming process involves removal of body fluids and replacing them with a solution of formaldehyde, often containing a pink dye. The body fluids are treated and disposed of. The embalming fluid normally consists of a 2% solution of formaldehyde an irritant, volatile acid. Approximately one pint of embalming fluid per stone weight of the body, plus one pint, is used. Consequently, one to two gallons of embalming fluid can be used and the effect of this on soil, soil organisms and air quality following burial or cremation needs further independent research. Our ignorance of the consequences of using this chemical is a cause for concern. In particular, the chemical is used with little regard for its impact on the cemetery, crematorium or community.

In some burial schemes, such as woodland burial, all chemicals may be prohibited. This restriction may apply to embalming fluid as well as horticultural chemicals. At the time this Charter is being prepared, it has been suggested that a “natural” embalming fluid should be made available. No confirmation of this has been obtained.

IS EMBALMING NECESSARY?

It is difficult to find support for routine embalming in the medical profession. There is no evidence that a body poses a threat to the living, except where death was due to a notifiable disease. No evidence exists of funeral directing, cemetery or crematorium staff obtaining an infection from an unembalmed body. Embalmers suggest that the process thoroughly disinfects the body and removes any risk, however slight, to any person who may come into contact with the body. Conversely, it would be logical to assume that if a real health risk existed, embalming would be mandatory. In fact, when a person dies of a notifiable disease, embalming is not allowed.

The British Institute of Embalmers comment as follows:

“The visual characteristics of a badly damaged body may be improved by additional specialised treatment where time is available. To be effective, it may be necessary to carry out the treatment over more than 24 hours. Effective cosmetic treatment in such cases may also decrease the trauma of a sudden death, and the benefit is almost always acknowledged by the bereaved”.

It should be noted that where the person required a high intake of drugs during their terminal illness, their body can deteriorate rapidly. This can be delayed by refrigeration.

VIEWING THE BODY

You need to consider carefully whether you will benefit from viewing the body at the funeral directors premises. If you do not intend to view the body, there is no valid reason to choose embalming. You may also have viewed the body immediately after death and have no wish to repeat this at the funeral directors premises.

You should appreciate that if you wish to view the body, you will be required to pay a fee for using the funeral directors Chapel of Rest (or Repose). Embalming may also be recommended as a pre-requisite to “viewing”, the implication being that an unembalmed body may cause distress. You may also feel that you are expected to view the body and that is a normal occurrence.

THE QUALITY OF THE EMBALMING

The British Institute of Embalmers (BIE) offers training and certification for members to maintain an identified standard of embalming. Their members may be self employed and provide a service to funeral directors, or are funeral directors or their staff. It takes a minimum one hour to correctly embalm a body and the charge for this was £20.00 to £25.00 (1996) which includes the cost of chemicals etc.

Some comments by the bereaved suggest that following embalming, the facial features of the body have been altered. Also, that the “drawn” appearance of the period prior to death, has been reversed by the unnatural filling-out effect of the embalming fluid. It appears that these are the results of poor quality embalming. If this occurs, you may wish to check with your funeral director whether the embalmer is qualified.

DO YOU HAVE A CHOICE?

Yes you do, you should reasonably expect to be informed about the embalming process and the advantages it offers. It should only be undertaken where an effective result is judged to be achievable. Unfortunately, this does not always occur. This is because many people accept the process as “cosmetic treatment” and do not recognise it as embalming. Also, the process may be routinely carried out as an inclusive part of the funeral “package”, without express permission. This decision is important as the process will involve an additional cost on the funeral account. In fact, the BIE have issued a Code of Ethics which clearly supports the need to make a specific decision about embalming. This states: “*The client’s informed consent, preferably in writing, must be obtained*”.

If you are opposed to embalming, it may be advisable to expressly forbid it as the decision is yours.