

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Information

Environmental issues have not featured prominently with regard to bereavement, possibly due to the sensitivity of the subject. This view is changing as environmental issues become increasingly important. The inclusion of the cremation process in the Environmental Protection Act 1990 is the most recent example of this. The services associated with bereavement have more impact on the environment than might be initially considered. Improvements in this area are very relevant to: "Acting locally – thinking globally".

Burial

Burial is sometimes suggested as a more environmentally acceptable alternative to cremation, as no air pollution is created. Such comments ignore the impact of herbicides and petrol mowers routinely used in cemeteries, often over long periods of time. In addition, the effects of interring chipboard and plastic coffins are unknown. Finally, the pollutant effects of burial on water supplies is generally unresearched. The benefits of the new woodland burial schemes appear to overcome many of these problems, particularly where they are associated with the use of biodegradable coffins and a reduction in embalming. Further research into these issues is urgently required.

The environmental and visual value of cemeteries to the local community has generally been ignored. The older sections often date back to Victorian times. They usually contain the oldest trees in the locality, and provide habitats for mammals, wildflowers, insects, bats and birds. The old stone memorials are often the only available habitat for lichens and mosses. Changing mowing regimes, placing bird and bat boxes and replanting herbaceous borders with butterfly plant species, are small yet effective parts of this process. These improvements to the older sections can complement intensive high quality maintenance in current and more recently used burial areas.

The environmental benefits of turning old burial areas into wildlife reserves are twofold. Firstly, there is a reduction in fossil fuel and herbicide usage. Secondly, the increasing birds and wildlife create a valuable resource, offering benefits to the grieving process as well as increasing leisure/educational possibilities for the community. This process does not impact on graves visited by mourners and is generally supported by the majority of those using the grounds.

The value of nature in improving the grieving process is rarely identified and yet, is very important. A singing bird, a beautiful tree, or a colourful bedding display, are all therapeutic and symbolic of new life. The alternative is the cemetery blighted by weed killer, without trees and a true harbinger of death.

Further Information

Other environmental issues involved with bereavement has been identified, but have not received any specific attention on a national scale. This is due to the sensitivity of the issue and in some cases, difficulty in identifying the actual owner of the item or materials involved e.g. Prostheses belong to the NHS.

These issues include:-

The use of environmentally friendly chemicals to clean memorial stones, as an alternative to caustic acids,

Composting a greater amount of mown grass, leaves, flowers and other materials removed from the grounds,

A reduction in the use of herbicides/chemicals and peat used in grounds maintenance,

Retaining cut timber in habitat piles, rather than burning which releases the carbon content,

Increasing tree planting in order to offset carbon dioxide emissions,

Reducing the use of moss and lichens in the construction of wreaths and other floral tributes,

Re-using wreath frames and associated fittings (generally plastic), as an alternative to their destruction,

Sourcing alternatives to teak, mahogany and other hardwoods, used in the construction of garden seats, burial caskets etc.

Returning the metal content of hip and other bone repair implements (prostheses) to the NHS, for recycling following removal from cremated remains.