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## Home Funerals

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Prior to the turn of the 20th Century in the United States, families and communities cared for their loved ones at home after death occurred. They washed the body, performed a funeral ritual, and carried out the burial. This was the only option and it was a natural event shared within the community. A lot has changed in after death care in this country but what remains the same is that families and communities still can care for the deceased and in so doing, create and facilitate very special and personalized final rites of passage. In 42 states (NE, NY, NJ, IN, MI, LA, CT, IL are the exception) this can be done without hiring a funeral director. As before, families can care for the body, facilitate a funeral/vigil, transport the body to a cemetery/crematory, and in some cases, bury the body on private land if state and/or county laws permit.

As with home births, caring for your own at the time of death is natural and sacred. When someone dies while receiving hospice care, that beloved parent, grandparent, child, spouse, friend, is already in the home. By keeping the body in the home for a period of time, those directly affected by the death are given the opportunity for this new reality to take hold in an unhurried and gentle fashion. Never is there a reason to treat a death as an emergency. The time after a death can be very profound and healing.

There may be different cultural and spiritual aspects that can determine care of the deceased. Inform the healthcare team of your faith, culture or traditional preferences.

### **Care of the body**

So much of the after death care depends on the circumstances of the death but in all situations (when a home funeral is a feasible option) what is most important is that the body is bathed well. This is primarily due to the fact that when a person dies, the body relaxes and often releases urine and/or feces which, if not removed, will cause an odor. Thorough oral care will help prevent odor as well. If the body has open wounds, the wound will need to be cleaned and a dressing applied to prevent drainage.

- Keep in mind that there is no right or wrong way to bathe a body. This final bathing can be a simple act of using soap and water or an elaborate ritual using essential oils, candles, chanting, or any other personal touch
- Rigor mortis is the stiffening of the body that occurs after death. It usually starts within 3 hours and reaches the maximum stiffness after 12 hours. It gradually relaxes until about 72 hours after death. If rigor mortis has set in or if the individual's joints were already stiff prior to death, dressing the body may seem somewhat difficult but with patience and a little creativity it can be done (for example, cutting the back of the clothing with a pair of scissors may help).
- Once the body is clean, keeping it cooled is very important if holding vigil for more than 24 hours after death. Cooling can be accomplished by opening windows if the weather outside is cold or by cooling a room using an air conditioner. Dry ice is recommended to keep the body cool because it does not melt into a fluid as ice would do. Keep the dry ice in a plastic bag covered with a pillowcase. Make sure the plastic bag is open to allow venting of the

gases. Place the dry ice under the warmest areas of the body (under the head, shoulder blades, under the hips and on top of the stomach). Dry ice should not be touched with the hands. Make sure to wear gloves and use a fan or open window to allow the gases from the dry ice to escape. The dry ice will need to be replaced about every 24 hours. In most cases a body will keep for two or three days at 70 degrees or cooler without offensive decomposition or odor

## **Embalming**

Contrary to common belief, embalming is very rarely legally required (state laws may vary). In some states embalming **or** refrigeration needs to occur 24 hours after the death, while in other states, embalming is not required. Keeping the body cool using the aforementioned methods is sufficient in most situations. Contact the Funeral Consumers Alliance (FCA) or refer to [Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death](#) to find out about funeral/embalming/burial laws in your area (see below).

## **Legal requirements and planning**

- It is crucial to have a conversation regarding the patient's preferences for funeral and body arrangements. Knowing their wishes as part of advanced care planning can facilitate honoring the last request
- Even though laws exist which protect our rights to facilitate a home funeral, these laws are not commonly known
- In many cases, educating one's community may be required. This community can include family members, clergy, funeral home, cemetery and crematory personnel, medical personnel, neighbors, and in some situations even staff members of the local Office of Vital Statistics, the agency that keeps records on births, deaths, etc.
- In order to prevent unnecessary obstacles from occurring, discussing the plan in advance with those likely to be involved is highly recommended. And be sure to discuss your wishes with your hospice team so they can help you make a plan
- There are a growing number of individuals trained to help families with home funeral needs if more assistance is desired (see below for more information)

## **Where can I find more information on home funerals?**

- [A Family Undertaking](#), film by Elizabeth Westrate, 2004. Available on DVD
- Funeral Consumers Alliance (national office) - [www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)
- Websites: [www.finalpassages.org](http://www.finalpassages.org), [www.crossings.net](http://www.crossings.net), [www.homefuneraldirectory.com](http://www.homefuneraldirectory.com)

**Other HPNA Teaching Sheets are available at [www.HPNA.org](http://www.HPNA.org)**

## Reference

Slocum J, Carlson L. *Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death*. Hinesburg, VT: Upper Access, Inc. 2011.

*Home Funeral Directory*. 2011. How to plan a home funeral. Available at from <http://homefuneraldirectory.com/how-to-plan-a-home-funeral>. Retrieved July, 8 2011.

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