

Guidance for families caring for their dead themselves



Introduction

This guidance is applicable where a death is expected. When a sudden, unexpected death occurs, the police will need to be notified and the Coroner will be involved. Caring for a person who has died unexpectedly can only take place once their body has been released by the Coroner and permission has been given for the funeral to go ahead.

Under current British law, there is no mandatory requirement to engage a funeral director to care for the dead or to assist with arrangements for burial or cremation. Families are legally entitled to personally care for their dead themselves.

For those considering that they would like to look after their person independently rather than seeking a funeral director's assistance to take them into their care, this guidance will help you with the practical aspects involved.

While this document outlines best practice and the minimum level of care that should be given, it is important to acknowledge that specific cultures and faith groups may require supplementary additional rituals and customs. Often, these communities operate their own funeral services, or can enlist individuals knowledgeable in the practices and requirements handed down by their forebears. Community elders and faith leaders are valuable resources who can share the requirements of different cultures and faiths with regard to their dead.

The most essential advice is to plan ahead and ensure that you have anticipated what will need to be done, and the practicalities of doing so. We recommend anyone intending to look after a person who has died initially considers the following questions:

- Do you have the support of other family members or friends?
- Do you expect the death to occur at home?
- Do you intend to look after the person yourselves until they are buried or cremated?
- Do you have a suitable room to accommodate the person's body for several

days?

- Is the person's body in a fragile condition (e.g. bed sores or other wounds)?
- Have you sourced a supply of dry ice, or obtained a number of freezer packs?
- Will you be able to register the death and book the burial or cremation within a reasonably short period of time? (Over Christmas and `New Year there may be extended delays in getting an appointment at the register office).
- Have you sourced a supplier of a coffin or a shroud? It is important to be aware of any requirements your chosen crematorium or burial ground may have in this regard.
- Do you have access to suitable transport to take the body to the funeral venue?
- Have you made contact with the crematorium or burial ground to advise them that you will be organising the funeral yourself?
- Do you have all the relevant forms that will need to be completed?
- If the person is to be buried, have you made contact with a gravedigger?
- Do you have access to a local funeral director who will be prepared to advise you and step in if required?

When death occurs

Even when death is expected and anticipated, when the moment does occur, it can be a shock. You may find yourself experiencing a range of emotions; other family and friends may also react in different ways in coping with their grief.

Upon the person's death, you will need to contact their GP and ask them to come and confirm that the person had died, but it is important to note that there is no urgency or obligation to do anything immediately. Take time to allow yourself to acknowledge the magnitude of what has happened.

You may want to note the time that the person died, although this is only for your own knowledge, official documentation will record the time that a qualified person

pronounces life extinct.

When you feel ready, you can begin to tend to the person.

1. Caring for a person who has died

Caring for our dead is a practice that we have done for millennia. Looking after the body of someone you love after they have died can be immensely helpful for those involved, and, with common sense and good preparation, it can be a very special and meaningful experience.

Contrary to common belief, it's not as difficult as you might think. Caring for someone after death isn't as hard as caring for someone who can feel pain. It sounds unnecessary to say this, but you can't hurt your person when they've died. Lifting and moving their body carries less concern than it would do for a bed bound living person.

Preparation and co-operation are key. There are some practical things that you will need to be ready for, and some simple precautions that you can take to minimise problems.

You will need at least one other person to help you, and ideally, you'll have the agreement and support of the whole family in keeping your person at home even if not everyone feels able to be involved.

It is also a good idea to make contact with a local funeral director who you can call on to step in if you need them to - sometimes circumstances mean you need to change your plans. You will need to pay them for their assistance so do check what they will charge you to come and collect the person if you need them to.

If you are ready to find out more, we have set out straightforward guidance for you below.

We recommend that you read this guidance before your person dies to familiarise yourself with what you will need to begin preparations, such as gathering the items you'll need, or freezing the freezer packs in advance.

Firstly, some simple rules to follow.

- Cool the body as soon as you can.
- Keep the room as cold as possible – turn off the heating, close the curtains to keep out the sun. If it is very warm, consider hiring an air conditioning unit to chill the room.
- If you open a window, ensure you keep the opening covered to prevent insects coming in.
- If you leave the body alone for any time, cover the face securely with a cloth or sheet to ensure that no insects can get to the nose or mouth.
- Make sure that if you plan to place the person in their coffin from their bed, you've worked out a way of getting the coffin out of the house safely and easily. Otherwise, you may need to arrange to ask a funeral director to help you to transfer the person using a stretcher before placing them in the coffin.

What to expect

When death occurs, changes begin almost immediately. If you're with your person as they die, you will probably notice a change in the colour of their skin, a pallor coming over them once their heart has stopped pumping blood around their body. They may begin to look blotchy, or pale and waxy, and their finger and toenails may go blue in colour. They will remain warm to the touch for a while, gradually cooling over a couple of hours.

About three or four hours after death, rigor mortis will begin to set in – this is where the body becomes stiff and difficult to move. It begins with the eyelids, the jaw and the neck, and gradually extends over the body. Rigor mortis may come and go; eventually, after about 24 hours it will ease, and the body will be relaxed again. This means that the jaw will relax, and the mouth will fall open unless it is propped closed by a rolled scarf or towel.

Deterioration, or decomposition of the body begins straight away on a microscopic level in the cells, and as time goes by it will accelerate. The speed at which a body deteriorates will depend on a number of factors; the temperature, the humidity, the condition with which the person died, their build and any medications they may have been taking before death. Generally, people who are larger will deteriorate faster than those who are thinner. As a body deteriorates, bacteria from the gut will multiply and the organs will begin to break down, causing a distinctive smell associated with dead bodies that can be distressing to experience.

Slowing down the natural processes of deterioration is generally a priority for people who want to care for their dead themselves, as this will enable the body to remain at home for a longer period without problems. Several days is easily possible if the body is quickly cooled and then kept at a cool temperature. If properly managed, keeping a body at home for up to a fortnight could be possible.

To achieve this, you will need to be prepared to act quickly to cool the body, ideally washing and dressing them and then beginning the cooling process before rigor mortis sets in.

Laying out the body

This is the simple act of washing and dressing the person who has died. You'll need two people to manage this, as it involves lifting and turning.

It is recommended that you wear plastic gloves to lay out a body as you may come into contact with body fluids or faeces. You might also want to wear a plastic apron to protect your clothes.

Moving the body can cause air to be expelled from the lungs which may cause a groaning sound – this is quite normal, but can alarm people if they aren't expecting it.

Movement can also cause fluid from the stomach to come up into the mouth or nose – up to a litre could come up, so place a towel over the person's face as you move them. Urine may leak from the bladder as it relaxes, or there may be some

diarrhoea – an incontinence pad underneath and gentle pressure on the lower abdomen should help to empty any bladder or bowel contents.

What you'll need:

- Bowls and jugs
- Warm water
- Soap and shampoo
- Washcloths or sponges
- Incontinence pads
- Towels
- Cotton wool
- Essential oils
- Moisturiser
- Dressings for any existing wounds
- Nail scissors
- A razor and shaving foam
- A comb or brush
- A hairdryer
- Clean clothes or a sheet to wrap the body in
- Clean bedding
- A bag for soiled clothes, bedding or pads.

Before you begin, make sure you have everything you need to hand. Take your time and work together, making sure you each know what you are doing. Lay towels on the bed next to the person to catch any splashes.

To wash the hair, it may be easiest to move the person so that their head is off of the edge of the bed. One of you can support the head while the other places a bowl under it, then gradually pours warm water over the hair before shampooing and rinsing.

Add some essential oils to a fresh bowl of water for rinsing, then starting with the face, soap and wash gently, rinsing the washcloth frequently and gently patting dry as you go. Work down the body, turning the person onto their side to reach the

back, (remembering to cover the face with a towel in case fluid comes out) then rolling them over to ensure you've washed and dried all areas.

Trim the nails, shave if necessary and apply moisturiser to the face, hands and any areas of dry skin. If there are areas of damaged skin, apply an adhesive dressing.

Once you've washed and dried the body and hair, you can clear away any damp or soiled towels and pads and prepare to dress your person in the clean clothes you have ready.

It's sensible to slip an incontinence pad into underwear to absorb any leakage, and to place a pad underneath the groin area for extra security.

Simple clothing is easiest, such as nightgowns that can be slipped over the head and gently pulled down. If you wish to dress your person in particular clothes, it is recommended to just work slowly, rolling and turning them as you need to. Do make sure that your chosen outfit isn't too small for the person, as it will be extremely difficult to get someone into a tight-fitting set of clothing.

Generally, when putting on jumpers or sweatshirts, it's easiest to lay the garment face down and head down on the person's torso, then guide the hands and arms into the sleeves before lifting the top over their heads and pulling down. This technique also works with dresses that don't have front fastenings.

Shirts and other front fastening garments are easiest to put on by slipping one arm in and pushing the material as high up the arm as possible to achieve some 'give' as you roll the person to one side and push the material underneath them, then manoeuvring the other arm into the remaining sleeve before adjusting the material and fastening.

Once you are ready to place fresh bedding underneath the body, you can do this by the process of rolling up the old bedding as a helper supports the body on its side, then rolling the fresh bedding into place before laying the body back, then rolling it the other way, pulling the bedding out from underneath it and pulling the fresh bedding into place. It can be a bit fiddly, but just take your time. Remove any pillows, it is better for the person to be laid flat.

Cooling the body

What you'll need:

- A good number of reusable freezer blocks – at least 24. Make sure these are all frozen before the death occurs.
- Plastic freezer bags (large enough to fit one of the freezer packs inside). You will be discarding the bags after one use, so you will need a lot.

When you've washed and dressed your person, using 12 of the packs from the freezer, put each one inside a plastic bag, and then place them over the torso, with two underneath the lower back (the kidney area).

The idea is to rapidly cool the parts of the body over the organs, so you will need to ensure that the blocks cover from the top of the thighs to the throat area. Place packs around the neck as well. If your person is large, you may need more than 12 packs to completely cover the area you need to.

Initially, the remaining warmth in the body will cause the freezer blocks to melt quite fast, so they will need to be changed every five or six hours – as the body cools, the freezer blocks should stay frozen for longer. When you change them, discard the plastic bags and place new frozen blocks in new bags in their place.

You will need to keep an eye on the blocks and ensure that the body is kept cold throughout the time you are caring for your person at home; it's better to change the blocks more frequently than needed rather than allowing them to thaw and the cooling process to be compromised.

Continue to keep the room as cold as possible. Air the room carefully, making sure that you don't allow any flies or other insects to enter. An occasional burst of fly spray will help deal with any that might have slipped in unnoticed, and it is sensible to pop some cotton wool into each nostril as well as ensuring that the face is covered securely if you leave your person's body alone for any length of time.

Changes

As time passes, you may notice subtle yet definite changes in the body. The eyes will sink back and appear hollow, the skin texture may harden and change, and the skin colour begin to change from day to day. This is all part of the normal process. Moisturising the skin daily, particularly the face and hands, will help to prevent hardening of the skin; natural coconut oil is inexpensive and effective for this purpose.

You may begin to notice a slight odour from the body. Herbs or pot pourri in the room or essential oils in a burner can help to minimise this, but you might find that the odour intensifies to an extent that it becomes difficult to continue keeping the person in the house. This is where it will be invaluable to have a funeral director aware of the situation and in the background on standby, particularly if things change over a weekend.

Sometimes, changes in weather conditions can cause the natural process of deterioration to rapidly accelerate, particularly if there are changes in air pressure such as when thunderstorms occur. A sudden change in the condition of a body can be distressing for everyone but if you have a contingency plan in place and can make a phone call to arrange for the body to be taken to a mortuary, the distress can be minimised.

In conclusion

Looking after somebody who has died yourself can be immensely rewarding. Knowing that you have ensured that your person was cared for in death as they were cared for in life, by people who loved them, can help you feel that you have done everything possible for them, until the very last moment.

By keeping your person at home, you will be able to spend as much time with them as you need, and seeing the gradual changes that take place as time goes by can make coming to terms with the death a little easier.

Not everyone will want to do this, nor will everyone be able to, and sometimes circumstances will mean that the opportunity doesn't arise - but if you are someone who both wants to and feels that you can look after your dead person,

we would highly recommend it. If you have a supportive, back up funeral director in place, then very little can go wrong.

Many funeral directors will be happy to act as a consultant in the background – you may need to pay a small fee, but it will be worth it for the peace of mind. Some are willing to come and check your person on a daily basis, others will be there to answer questions if they arise. Almost all funeral directors will be happy to come and collect your person and look after them in refrigerated conditions if circumstances change, such as a delay in the date of the funeral, or if natural processes make it difficult for you to keep looking after your person at home.

This guidance will be most relevant for families who have been caring for a person at home at the end of their life, but it can also apply to anyone who wants to look after their relative at home even when death occurs elsewhere, or unexpectedly. The logistics of you collecting a person who has died from a hospital, care home hospice or the coroner's mortuary when you are not a funeral director may be challenging, but it is legal and possible to bring someone home to be looked after by family and friends if this is your wish. You will need to ensure you have assistance to move your person, a coffin or covered stretcher, and a suitable vehicle. To minimise officialdom, it is likely you will need to have registered the death and be in receipt of the green form, and you will need to comply with signing any release forms required. Again, a supportive funeral director will be able to assist you with this if needed.

Anyone choosing to do this is likely to be more than capable of organising all of the practical aspects and ensuring that they have thought through their plans; the one legality that needs to be kept in mind is that the person's body must be kept covered at all times while in public.