

DIY Funerals ***(Direct it yourself cremation or burial)***

It is perfectly legal!

Don't let anyone tell you that DIY is not legal or possible, nor that a body has to be embalmed. These are misguided opinions from people who have been ill informed or have a vested interest. A DIY funeral should be pretty straightforward and logical. The Natural Death Center (NDC) has never heard any regrets from families wishing they had used a professional, not once, on the contrary all have said how helpful everyone was and that they had a lovely day, carried out with love and at their own pace.

Clear Communication is the key!

Most people die in hospital and most hospitals have mortuaries. If you speak directly to the mortuary staff, not patient affairs or the bereavement office and ask nicely, they will usually be very accommodating and pleased to help. They should be able to look after the deceased for a few days whilst you make any funeral arrangements. When asking this favour of the mortuary staff, be mindful that their space is limited and even with good refrigeration, nature will take its course and the decaying process will start. Therefore you will need to arrange the funeral promptly.

Paperwork

You will need to obtain the cause of death paperwork from the doctor. If the deceased had not been in their care for long or if the doctor is uncertain of the cause of death, the coroner will be informed. This might initiate the need for a post mortem (PM), which will establish the cause of death. If you wish to avoid a dissection PM, you can pay privately for a digital, non-invasive imaging scan which in 70% of cases will determine the cause of death. The coroner will need to agree fully to this course of action.

If you are planning a cremation, you will need two doctors' signatures but if the coroner is involved this does not apply. In the majority of cases the coroner is not required so you will need to source a second doctor, their fee is £164. If the first doctor is the deceased's own GP the second doctor cannot be from the same medical practice.

If you are planning a burial, this fee, or 'doctor tax', known as ash-cash in the trade is not applicable as burial does not destroy any evidence of foul play or malpractice.

Once you have the paperwork from the doctor(s) or permission from the coroner to go ahead and make funeral arrangements you will need to register the death. This is usually done at the registry office in the area where the person has died. If the death occurred in Scotland it can be registered in any registration district within Scotland. The registry office will tell you what paperwork to take with you when you make an appointment.

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Coffins

You can find a list of coffin suppliers who will sell direct to the public on the NDC website. In general, as long as an order is placed before midday and it is an off the peg and not a 'bespoke' design, you should receive the coffin the next day.

The bottoms of coffins can vary so make sure that you order one that is acceptable to the crematorium or burial ground. Ensure that the coffin you order is long enough and be generous. There is nothing worse than having to jam someone's head in against the top and it is very awkward to bend their knees so their feet fit in. People are taller than you think when prostrate and with their toes pointing downwards.

Coffin handles are often for show and will snap off when used, so make sure you buy a coffin with load bearing handles and if the deceased is heavy always check what the maximum load is for that particular coffin.

Transport

If the coffin fits in the back and the vehicle is legal and roadworthy you can use any vehicle to transfer a coffin. If you are going to the hospital to collect the deceased in an estate car you should cover the coffin with a blanket to disguise it as it will be on public view. If you cannot find an estate car or suitable van then you can hire a hearse and driver from companies known as Carriage Masters. **You do not need special insurance.**

Booking a crematorium

The crematorium manager will possibly be nervous about you organising a funeral without an undertaker. Their equipment is very expensive and they need assurances that you will not place anything in the coffin that will explode or melt and weld itself onto the inside of the cremator. So, no bottles of whisky or glass lensed spectacles. Any medical devices such as a pacemaker will need to be removed prior to putting the body in the coffin, as these explode.

Similarly, please check if there are any restrictions regarding clothing and footwear especially, as plastics cause pollution when burnt.

Go and see the crematorium staff to talk over these things and complete their paperwork. At the same time you can check with them that the coffin you would like is cremation compatible and acceptable to them. There is only one cremation company, who are in the Greater London and South East region, that refuse to deal directly with the public, they represent less than 2% of all crematoria. Many crematoria staff wrongly believe an undertaker has to be employed for a funeral to take place. If you find this to be the case ask to speak to the manager.

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Booking a cemetery

In general, natural burial grounds are familiar with families arriving for an interment with their own dead. Municipal cemeteries will be more surprised and might be obstructive. Remember, anyone can act as a funeral director, you **DO NOT** have to be licensed or 'qualified' so they should allow you to pall bear and lower the coffin yourselves. They are, after all, providing a public service and this should not be conditional on employing a funeral director. Note, cemeteries do not provide bearers, so you will need your own team.

DO NOT FORGET the registrar's green form. The cemetery will not allow you to proceed with the burial unless you hand this over.

DIY burial is not rocket science. Please ring the NDC helpline for tips on carrying a coffin. You will need four people to carry a normal weight coffin and one extra to remove the supports across the grave. These are bars that are placed across the grave, known as putlogs or putlock, supporting the coffin until it is time to lower it. If the coffin is very heavy you will need more people to carry it.

The most important communication with the cemetery is to ensure that they have the correct coffin size and so that they dig the right size of grave, ready for you on the correct day. As soon as you receive the coffin, measure the maximum length plus the width at the head, shoulder and foot. The widest part is usually the lid. If handles stick out further than the lid add this to the overall measurements. Get these measurements to the person who is digging the grave and tell them that you have not added anything on. They will then add approximately 2 inches or 5cm all round to ensure that the coffin will fit and doesn't get stuck.

Most cemeteries will employ a gravedigger. If they do not and rely on the undertaker to provide one you will need to source one locally and liaise directly with them. Ask the cemetery or local clergy who is familiar with the site. If digging the grave is something you would consider doing ask if it is a possibility. You will need to be supervised so do not expect to make a financial saving.

Collecting the deceased

If you have looked after the body at home this section will be irrelevant, as you would simply place the person into their coffin at home. Ensure that you have where possible planned your exit by ensuring you have a straight run out of the house with no awkward corners or narrow stairs.

If you are collecting the deceased from the hospital mortuary remember to be flexible with the timing. The staff at the mortuary are very busy people but if you respect their workload and if you ask nicely and are flexible regarding the collection time they will probably offer to help you place the deceased into the coffin. They may even dress them for you if you do not want to do this yourself. The dead do not have to be dressed as they can simply be wrapped in a sheet.

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Be prepared to see cannula and catheters still in situ, the mortuary staff will probably remove these if you ask for their help. You can ask them in advance of the collection to have a look at the body for anything like this and check if they are allowed and willing to remove them for you. While the body is in their care you could ask if they would kindly measure the deceased prior to you buying the coffin.

If you do not wish to see the body, make sure that you inform the mortuary staff of this before you arrive. Be very clear as there may be different staff on duty when you arrive.

You will have to sign for the body, so make sure you have all the relevant paperwork with you to show the mortuary staff on collection. This may be the green form or a copy of the original cremation paperwork, if the original is with the crematorium. These are the forms that the registrar would have given you when you registered the death. This will reassure the mortuary staff that you are not some random person stealing a body.

The mortuary will have a trolley to wheel the coffin out to your vehicle. We would advise that you place a layer of plywood in the back of the vehicle to help slide the coffin in and out.

If the deceased is a very large person the mortuary staff may well refuse to help as lifting a heavy person may cause injury to their backs. In this case you may need to employ a funeral director to help you. Good independent funeral directors should be employable for any individual task, in a sort of mix and match way.

Looking after a body at home

Talking about death and what happens to a body in death can enable those who have chosen to look after a family member or friend after death to prepare for the changes that occur. If you would like more information on looking after a dead body at home please contact the NDC helpline.

Lastly

DO NOT miss your slot at the crematorium. Make sure you allow for possible traffic holdups.

Check that any coffin liner either fitted by you or pre fitted is compatible with the crematorium or natural burial site. Similarly, if you place any absorbent materials, bedding or other furnishings in the coffin, check that these are acceptable.

If you have any worries or questions about any part of the process of DIY funerals please do not hesitate to contact NDC helpline on 01962 712690