

## **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 process of decay will start. Therefore, you will need to arrange the funeral promptly.

### **Paperwork**

You will need to obtain the cause of death certificate from the doctor. If the deceased had not been in their care for long, was not seen by the GP within the last two weeks, 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 examination (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. In 70% of cases, this 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 on the medical certificate, 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; the fee for each doctor's signature is currently £82. 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 (in the current Covid crisis, most registration is taking place over the phone).

## **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 (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. Be generous. There is nothing worse than having to jam someone's head in against the top and it is 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 if used, so make sure you buy a coffin with load bearing handles. If the deceased is heavy, always check what the maximum load is for that particular coffin. You do not need to carry a coffin on your shoulders; suspending it at hip height from the handles is far easier.

## **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 to transport a coffin.**

## **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; these explode (removal is normally done by the undertaker). You could engage an embalmer to remove it for you which will have a cost implication.

Similarly, please check if there are any restrictions regarding clothing and especially footwear 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, based in the Greater London and South East region, that refuse to help the public directly. They represent less than 2% of all crematoria. Many crematoria staff may incorrectly believe that 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.

### **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. Ensure that the cemetery or the grave digger will provide the lowering webbing.

**DO NOT FORGET** the registrar's green form or coroner's paperwork. 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 standard weight coffin and one extra to remove the supports across the grave. These are usually wooden bars that are placed across the grave, known as putlogs or putlocks, supporting the coffin until it is time to lower it. If the coffin is very heavy you will need more people.

The most important communication with the cemetery is to ensure that they are given the correct coffin size so that they can dig the right size grave, ready for scheduled day of burial. As soon as you receive the coffin, measure the maximum length plus the width across 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 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 which local gravedigger is familiar with the site. If digging the grave is something you would consider doing yourself ask if it is a possibility. You will need to be supervised, so do not expect to make a financial saving.

### **Collecting the deceased from a hospital mortuary.**

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 planned your exit and 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, if you respect their workload, 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. Although, the dead do not have to be dressed; they can simply be wrapped in a sheet.

Be prepared to see cannula and catheters still in situ. The mortuary staff may 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 to remove them for you. While in their care, you could ask if they would kindly measure the deceased prior to you ordering 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 who answer the door.

You will have to sign for the body, so make sure you have all the relevant paperwork with you to show the mortuary staff. 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 or similar in the back of the vehicle to help slide the coffin in and out without snagging the upholstery.

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 can enable those who have chosen to look after a family member or friend 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. There are also home funeral specialists who will come into the home and support families with the nitty gritty of caring for a body at home and may be accessed via the Home Funeral Network which can be found at [www.homefuneralnetwork.org.uk](http://www.homefuneralnetwork.org.uk)

### **Lastly**

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

Also 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 are using a wicker coffin it is worth protecting any waterproof liner from being punctured by any rough, cut ends of the willow within the base; a layer of cardboard would suffice.

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