

DEATH & DYING – RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

Religious and Cultural Beliefs

When dealing with a multicultural community there are many religious and cultural beliefs that need to be considered. The primary source of information regarding the care of the individual or the person's body is the client and / or the family. It is essential assumptions are not made and that in every case, the client or family are consulted about these arrangements in advance, where possible.

Keep in mind that religious and cultural beliefs vary between individuals, even in close family units, and can impact on such issues as acceptance of blood or blood products, amputation, organ donation, resuscitation, handling of the body just before or after death and transfer to the mortuary or coroner.

General Belongings

Hindus – a significant ring, medal, necklace or thread worn by the deceased must not be removed. Ask a family member for advice regarding the procedure for removal of any such objects.

Sikhs – the comb, wrist bangle, ceremonial sword and special shorts must not be removed. Ask the family about the removal of any such objects.

Special Religious Cultural Observances

It is important to involve spiritual leaders such as Priest, Rabbis, Monks, Imams – check with the client and/or family regarding special needs. Extended family members may expect to be present during the last hours for prayer or to perform certain tasks upon death e.g. Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islanders, Jewish Orthodox / Liberals, Maoris, Eastern Christians (Orthodox), Baha'i and Islamic communities.

Removal of the Body to the Mortuary

There are some religious and cultural considerations that need to be taken into account. Some families may object to autopsies and need to be informed of such procedures and the coroner's office needs to be contacted immediately if such objections are made.

Buddhism

Once death has been pronounced the body should be gently covered by a cotton sheet. Care must be taken not to create any disturbance to it. It should not be disturbed or touched - do not close the eyes, mouth etc.

Leave the body just as it is, as the family may require the body remain unmoved for eight hours following death, to allow the spirit to pass into the next world.

When the body is removed, the attendant should refrain from speaking.

Christianity: *Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Uniting Church, Eastern Christians (Orthodox Churches)...*

Notify the Parish Priest or relevant spiritual leader as soon as possible after death, after consultation with the family. The body is prepared in the usual manner prior to transfer to the Mortuary.

Eastern Orthodoxy (Greek, Russian, Macedonian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Armenian, Old Calendarist, Coptic...) – ask the family if the body needs to be washed in a particular manner; some families may wish to wash the body with a cloth soaked in wine. Some families may wish to provide a white shroud for the body to be wrapped in.

Hindism

Do not remove any special rings, threads, necklaces or medals.

Eyes are closed and limbs are straightened.

Do not wash the body – this is a funeral rite performed by relatives.

Wrap the body in plastic. It is of extra importance that disposable gloves are worn whilst preparing body and family members may become further distressed if non-Hindus touch the deceased.

Cremation is preferable within 24 hours of death; therefore all paperwork needs to be completed as soon as possible.

Islam

Lay the deceased on one side or on their back facing Mecca (north-west direction in Victoria). A person of the same gender should handle the deceased, where possible.

Allow the family to be alone with the deceased to recite the Qu'ran over the body.

Do not undress or wash the body. The face and whole body must be covered with a sheet. The body must be handled as little as possible.

Once the family members have completed the relevant preparation of the body, the nursing staff may then wrap the body in plastic prior to transfer to the Mortuary.

Prompt burial is required therefore all paperwork needs to be completed as soon as possible.

Judaism - Jewish Progressive (Liberal) and Jewish Orthodox

After death has been determined, it is preferable that the children or friends must close the eyes and mouth of the deceased.

Lay the body flat and straighten the body with hands by sides, and feet facing the doorway.

Remove all pillows under the head.

Do not wash the body or wrap it in plastic.

Do not remove any dentures.

Jewellery may be left on the body, allow the family to perform this task.

Cover the face with top sheet.

When surgical amputations occur, these parts should be retained and a Rabbi informed / consulted immediately. It is preferable not to discuss these matters with the family members.

It is a matter of importance for Jewish people to be buried as soon as possible after death. It is therefore essential that the doctor write the Death Certificate immediately after death, to facilitate the early removal of the body from the hospital.

Maori Cultural Traditions

Family members may wish to say a prayer of 'letting go' to release the soul from the body and attend to the lifting of the 'tapu' (a religious rite related to spiritual powers).

Usually the body is to be returned home from the hospital.

Sikhism

Do not remove any religious artefacts from the body – comb, wrist bangle, sword or special shorts.

Do not undress or wash the body, this will be performed in the Sikh tradition.

The eyes may be closed and limbs straightened.

Cremation is required as soon as possible after death; therefore all paperwork needs to be completed as soon as possible.

Vietnamese Cultural Traditions

Following death family members may wish to lay the body on the ground for a few minutes.

The body is then placed on the bed and the face covered with a piece of coarse white paper to prevent the deceased seeing their family in grief.

Normally the eldest son of the family will be in charge of all the ceremonies and rituals. In most families, there is an experienced older relative who will advise on the proper behaviour / proceedings.

This information was compiled after consultation with community members and religious leaders in Victoria.