

Laying Out : guidance

The Cemetery and Crematorium receives a number of enquiries from relatives who wish to conduct in part or whole the funeral services for a loved one. Often people are unaware of the extent of preparation of care required in handling and transporting the deceased. This note offers guidance on preparation and care of the deceased at home. A number of guidance notes are available for further reference with regard to other aspects of funeral arrangements. It is advised that if in any doubt you contact us directly for assistance. You may wish to place certain parts of the funeral arrangements into the care of others and consider employing the professional service of a funeral director and/or community nurse whom can provide practical 'hands on' help as you require.

If it is your intention to care for the deceased at home then the following guidance offers some straightforward practical advice.

“Laying out” or “last offices” as it is sometimes called can be done immediately after a doctor has confirmed death. In cases of uncertainty, it is wise to leave the deceased “in situ” till the doctor is satisfied as to the clinical cause of death.

“Laying out” refers simply to washing the deceased and putting on clean clothing, normally pyjamas for a man and a nightdress for a woman, in preparation for their removal to a Funeral Home. However, as well as attention to basic hygiene, other simple procedures can be carried out which will not only help to ensure that the deceased goes on to the next stage of preparation in the best possible condition, but will also enhance the presentation of the body, should relatives wish to pay their respects in the Nursing Home.

If the eyes of the deceased can be closed gently by a simple touch, all well and good. However, if the eyes are difficult to close or will not stay closed, then on no account should they be glued or the eyelids pulled. This causes damage to the delicate tissues, which can be difficult to disguise.

If the teeth have been removed before death, then it is advisable to try and reinsert them. This gives the face a more “lifelike” appearance. Great care must be taken so as not to damage the lips. The task may be made simpler if some Vaseline is applied to the lips before insertion of the teeth. This also retains moisture and so retards shrinkage of the lips due to

dehydration. Alternatively, if difficulty is experienced, then it would be advantageous if a small pillow or amount of soft material is placed under the chin, resting on the collarbones, to keep the lower jaw supported. This helps to prevent unnecessary stretching of the facial tissues.

Removal of a ring(s) is sometimes difficult. Vaseline or suitable moisturising agent massaged into the area of the ring and over the whole finger may aid removal. If the ring is too tight, then forcing it may cause damage to the finger and you may need to seek the assistance of a nurse or funeral director.

Arms and hands, ideally, should be elevated so they rest on top of the chest or abdomen. If the arms will not stay in place, then a pillow placed under each elbow will help. This position enables good blood drainage, resulting in less discolouration due to “hypostasis” or the gravitation of the blood to the lowest dependent parts of the body with the cessation of circulation.

Unless rigor mortis is very pronounced it can generally be broken down by gentle massage and flexing of joints such as fingers, wrists, elbows and shoulders etc. The head may be supported and gently turned from side to side so it will lie in a straight position on a pillow.

Most importantly, in order to retard decomposition, the deceased is best kept under refrigeration or in cold storage. A local funeral director may assist you with this service until the time of the funeral.

However, if it is your wish to keep the deceased at home it is recommended that the room in which the body is kept is not heated in any way, either artificially (i.e. radiators or fires) nor naturally (i.e. sunlight). It is also advisable to keep the windows and doors to the room closed. Particularly in hot weather, contamination can easily occur if a blowfly enters the room and lays its eggs on the deceased. This will result in maggots in as little as 24 hours, which will be extremely distressing for you. It is advisable to gently place a handkerchief or similar over the deceased's face in between visits when the deceased may be left unattended.

If the above points are observed you can rest assured that you will have done the best you possibly can for the deceased to ensure that the care you have given to them in life is carried over into death.