

# Home Funerals—A Revived Tradition

Before funeral homes there were “undertakers” in 19th century America. Undertakers were carpenters or furniture store owners, who undertook the side business of building caskets. Before that, each family took care of its own deaths, with the menfolk making coffins and the women washing and laying out the deceased in the parlor where friends and neighbors would come to pay their respects. It is still done this way in most of the world outside North America.

Now there is a growing attempt to return to the tradition of home funerals. Home funerals and family care of bodies is perfectly legal in California. Embalming is not required, nor does it take a licensed mortician to transport a body. Most cemeteries do not require a casket, which would go against the religious tenets of Moslems and Jews who often bury bodies in direct contact with the earth and without embalming.

The Department of Consumer Affairs, Funeral and Cemetery Bureau publishes a booklet, the *California Guide for Funeral and Cemetery Purchases*. The guide states: “The law does not prohibit consumers from preparing their own dead for disposition. If you choose to do this you must file with the local registrar a properly completed Certificate of Death, signed by the attending physician or coroner and obtain a Permit for Disposition before any disposition can

occur. You must also provide a casket or suitable container and make arrangements directly with the cemetery or crematory.”

California Health and Safety Code Section 102780 allows persons acting in lieu of licensed funeral directors to handle funeral arrangements. This person may be a family member, DPAHC (Durable Power of Attorney for Health Care) assigned Health Care Agent, or a legal guardian.

## Who Will Opt for Home Funerals?

Not everyone will want to do a home funeral. The ones who do are:

- People who are more independent and don't need a lot of support.
- People who realize that death is a natural part of life. They are more curious than afraid of death.
- Those who value the personalization possible by the after-death care of a loved one.

## *Home Funerals and Memorials Can Be More Personal*

- The rites can be as religious or secular as wanted. Use scented candles, incense, poetry, music, flowers, greenery, readings, speakers, flags, videos, photos, and/or mementos.
- The vigil or visitation can occur at the hours or days desired, be simple or elaborate to fit the personality of the deceased.
- Invite and involve the people you want, who knew and loved the deceased.
- Make and/or decorate the casket as you wish, inside and outside. Put personal belongings or notes in the casket if desired. You may also opt for a shroud or blanket for the body.
- Dry ice will be used for preservation, rather than embalming.
- Sometimes the family wants to dig the grave themselves. Consult the cemetery administration as to exact location, width, and depth and whether a liner is required.

- Families acting upon the request of a loved one who wants to die at home, preparing for their final exit amidst people they trust, rather than with strangers.
- Families who want to retain control and avoid the commercialization and impersonality of funeral homes.
- They have heard that being physically involved helps in grieving process, giving closure.
  - They will probably save money (no embalming, expensive casket, or use of middleman services).



## Planning Ahead Helps

The family can agree ahead of time who is to direct things and who will do which tasks. Lacking a family, the dying person can choose an agent under an Advance Health Care Directive to take charge of disposition.

The dying person can write or dictate his after-death wishes (a Funeral Consumer Alliance planing form or the “Before I Go, You Should Know” booklet would be fine) and arrange for a “Payable Upon Death” bank trust account naming the agent as the person to receive the money to cover last expenses.

The agent must locate a willing crematory operator or cemetery to work with. Read guidelines and rules. Find or make the burial or cremation box and decorate if desired. (See Resources on pack page for more information.) Make sure hospice, hospital, nursing home, or all people at home know that this will be a home-directed funeral, so no one has the body picked up by a funeral home. If the death is unexpected, the medical examiner must be notified and perhaps an autopsy will be needed. Make sure the coronor knows that someone in the family is acting as funeral director and to call that person when the body can be released.

For transportation, use someone's van, pickup truck, or SUV. May need two or more people to carry the body and container. Handles or cut-outs make it easier to move. Arrange to pick up ashes after the cremation to scatter or inter.

## Preservation and Care

Wash the body with warm water and soap; clean and trim nails; shampoo and arrange the hair; close eyes and mouth; use cosmetics if desired; some liquid might come through orifices after death and pads may be necessary.

Massaging with oil is an option. Dress the body or wrap in a shroud.



Decide whether you want some lining and pillow in the container; arrange body, paying attention to hair, face, and hands. Use dry ice to keep the body fresh for several days.

For cremation, make sure all contents of box are combustible. Pacemakers have to be removed because batteries would explode and damage the retort, but you can leave the artificial joints and other surgery miscellany.

## Legal Matters and Paperwork

If there is time to plan ahead, the sick person could compile a list of all known sources of death benefits, location of current and unpaid bills, key persons in his or her life and their contact information, combinations and passwords, location of important papers, and other information that would help the one administering the estate and/or funeral. What you need to know for death certificate: address, when the person moved to this

county and to California, names and birth places of decedent and each parent, military service dates and DD-214 discharge number (there could be death benefits coming), occupation, education level, cemetery or final disposition plans, social security number, birth and death dates).

Pick up blank death certificate from your county public health department, type in the known information in black ink, and take to the person's physician for him or her to fill in cause of death and sign. (\$12-\$14 each)

Your county will also require you to purchase a permit for disposition or burial whether you use a cemetery or a crematory. This is also obtained at the county public health department (\$11) after you have the certified death certificate.

The crematory or cemetery will need to have a copy of the approved death certificate and permit for disposition before accepting the body. You will need additional certified death certificates to collect death benefits and transfer property and accounts.

## Options

The family can choose to do only part of the after-death care, leaving the rest to a funeral home. The body can be kept refrigerated at the mortuary until they deliver it to the home for services. Or only use the mortuary for transportation to the cemetery. Or pay them to get the death certificate and permit for

disposition and perhaps the casket or alternative container. Or a loving family member can wash and dress the body at the funeral home, and have the mortuary do the rest. All combinations are possible with a willing mortuary.

## Resources

Local Funeral Consumers Alliance affiliate, find at [www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org). (or see a stamp below)

FCA Inc. ([www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)); 333 Patchen Dr., South Burlington, VT, 05403, (800) 765-0107. Joshua Slocum, Exec. Dir.

Final Passages, Jerri Lyons, Director, P.O. Box 1721, Sebastopol, CA 95473, (707) 824-0268; [finalpassages@softcom.net](mailto:finalpassages@softcom.net), [www.finalpassages.org](http://www.finalpassages.org). Consulting, publications.

Crossings: Caring for Our Own at Death, [crossingcare@earthlink.net](mailto:crossingcare@earthlink.net); 7108 Holly Avenue, Takoma Park, MD 20912; (301) 523-3033 phone consultations to individuals by appointment; in-service presentations to hospice, clergy, and social workers. Resource Guide: \$55.

Funeral Ethics Organization, Lisa Carlson, author of *Caring for the Dead, Your Final Act of Love*, Upper Access Publishers, \$29.99, (800) 310-8320.

PBS Documentary video: "A Family Undertaking," produced by Five Spot Films.

Nancy Jewel Poer, *Living Into Dying: A Journal of Spiritual, Practical Deathcare for Family and Community*, 2002.

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# FAMILY-DIRECTED

# HOME FUNERALS

**"OUR FAMILY TAKES  
CARE OF ITS OWN"**



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