



# **THE DO-IT-YOURSELF FUNERAL BOOK**

Written by LEAH MUNRO

1997 – original version, updated in 2013

2018 – this and the on-line version of this booklet have been updated, revised and edited by Miindala volunteers Janelle Huxley, Chetan Bloemhard, Wendy Haynes and Fiona Crosskill

**Cover photo**  
by Peter Munro

Dedicated to Leah's partner, Kim, who tragically died in 1997



**Disclaimer: the information in this booklet has been compiled to the best of our current knowledge and applies to Australia only. It is important to check some of the vital information with the Health Department in your State or country e.g. claiming the body from the hospital in your own car, or the legal requirements of shroud burials. There may be differences in local regulations.**

## **FEARLESS FUNERALS**

This booklet has been written to encourage people to talk openly about death and to become familiar with procedures around death. We fear what we don't know, so the more knowledge we have, the more empowered we are to make decisions in a crisis and the more enabled we are to enter the grieving process and begin our healing.

The idea of this booklet came up in a bereavement support group meeting and arose out of the question "How was the funeral for you?" In answer to this, many said they were unable to make clear decisions because of the emotional state they were in at the time, and then later felt hurt and angry that they did not have the funeral they wanted for their loved one.

The time leading up to the funeral and the funeral service itself are very important and precious and need to be handled wisely. They need to reflect the way the person lived, as well as recognising the needs of the grieving family.

Leah Munro

Leah Munro initiated 'The Bellingen Shire Bereavement Service' in 1997 after her partner was tragically killed in a road accident. She realised that there was no support for people who were grieving. Until 2004 the Bereavement Service operated from the Bellingen Hospital and helped many people. In 2005 the Service was absorbed into 'Miindala', a local volunteer organisation supporting people in loss and grief, death and dying.

Leah wrote the original 'Do it Yourself Funeral Book in 1997 and what you find here is an updated and re-written version by Miindala volunteers.

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## BEFORE A DEATH OCCURS – matters to consider

Many decisions can be made in advance, whether planning your own funeral or the funeral of a loved one.

At the end of this booklet you will find more information and resources as well as contact details of several not-for-profit organisations to guide you further.

### DOCUMENTATION

- Prepare official papers (e.g. Power of Attorney, Advance Health Care Directive, Enduring Guardianship) regarding your wishes and preferences for care, support and health decisions as needed. Ensure your will is current.
- Allocate a special drawer or box where all of these documents can be secure and easy to find when needed. Also include copies of your birth and marriage certificates and other official papers – divorce papers, death certificates of other family members, adoption papers etc.
- Notify other family members and/or a trusted friend where you have stored them. You may also store your will with your solicitor.
- Let other family members know what you might want to do and where the relevant paper work /information is kept.
- *Many put their wishes in their Will, however be aware that the Will is often not read out until after the funeral.*

### DISPOSAL OF THE BODY

Some choices to consider:

- A burial in a public cemetery.
- A cremation.  
Both of the above require a funeral director, but it's up to you how actively involved you want to be in the process/ decision-making and how much or how little you want to leave to the funeral director. Check the costs and what they will allow or not allow beforehand.
- Interment at a private burial ground.
- A 'green' burial (available in special cemeteries that focus on restoring natural habitat).
- A burial on your own land (you must have at least 5 hectares to be able to do this). See 'Home Burials' p.10.  
These can be carried out *without* the services of a funeral director. If this is your intention, it is very important to plan it as soon as possible, e.g. creating your own plot on your own land takes time because it needs council approval.
- In a coffin or a shroud  
There are wooden coffin (purchased or homemade).  
There are also cardboard coffins available for purchase.  
The use of only a shroud needs permission from the burial ground authorities or Department of Health, and you will need to find out whether there are Health

Regulations to meet, and whether you need a coffin or body-bag when transporting the body to the burial site (see p.11).

## RITUAL AND SERVICES

- A service in a church, crematorium chapel, graveside or home.
- A wake - traditionally, this is an all-night vigil sitting with the dead person but today it can be any kind of formal or informal gathering around the body.
- A memorial service, where the body/casket is absent and the service is usually carried out at a later date.

## DO-IT-YOURSELF FUNERAL OR FUNERAL DIRECTOR

While it may give you a greater sense of participation and involvement and save on costs doing your own funeral arrangements, funeral directors can offer valuable support and ease at this time.

If you are planning on doing a lot yourself, there are some very accommodating funeral directors who are happy to help with whatever support you need, and it is worth ringing around to see which one will work with you best.

If you are using the services of a funeral director, please note the following:

- Once you enter a contract with a funeral director, the Department. of Health requires that the funeral director takes full responsibility for the body.
- If you wish the dead person to be brought home for a time, be aware that regulations require a minimum of three people to transfer the body in a coffin. Therefore, if the body is transported to the home, left there for two to three hours and then returned to the funeral home, for example, this would be a minimum of four hours of each person's time, a total of twelve hours costed at award rates.
- There is usually a cost involved for 'viewing' in the funeral parlour. Unless specifically asked not to, the face and hair of the dead person may be groomed including the use of make-up.

## **WHEN SOMEONE DIES AT HOME (from a known cause)**

### TWO LEGAL REQUIREMENTS

- The body has to be disposed of within five days. If a longer period is required, permission from the Health Department must be sought.
- The doctor needs to issue a death certificate within 48 hours.

### SLOW DOWN

- There is no need to rush. Spending time with the person who has died can help with the grieving process.

- You don't need to officially contact anyone for at least 24 hours if you want to spend more time with them. [A doctor's certificate is required within 48 hours].
- Phone a relative or friend and tell them what you need or want.
- Let your doctor know if you want to spend more time with the person before any officials are contacted.
- Do not contact the funeral director until and unless you are absolutely clear about what you want.
- Check if the dead person has left any instructions.
- Now decide what you will do. Discuss this with the family.

## WHETHER YOU CAN KEEP THE PERSON AT HOME OR NOT

It will **not** be possible to keep the body at home if:

- The correct temperature cannot be maintained.
- The person has an infectious disease.
- It was an unexpected death and an autopsy is required.

In all other cases it is possible to keep the dead person at home until the funeral if you can keep the temperature as cold as possible - officially between 3-5 degrees Celsius.

## Suggestions about maintaining the right temperature

- Use a cooling plate (check if there is one kept locally - see Resources at the back of the booklet).  
If there isn't one:
- Choose a dry, cool room.
- Fill 2-litre plastic milk containers with water, freeze them and pack them around the body. Make sure to replace bottles that are melting.
- Use an air conditioner or have a fan blowing over blocks of ice.
- Pack dry ice around the body.

## Prepare the body within four hours of the death

- If desired or necessary, wash the person.
- Rub warm rosemary oil on the body; this acts as an antiseptic, deodorant and preservative.
- Use adult disposable napkins in case of leakage of the perineal area.
- Dress the body preferably in something long.
- Place a pillow under the head, reducing the chance of any leakage from mouth or nose.
- Tie a scarf under the chin to close the mouth (this can be removed after rigor mortis sets in).
- Close eyes and place a coin on each eyelid (these can be removed after rigor mortis sets in).
- Place their hands over the heart or on their lap.
- If you have the coffin, you can line it with plastic and place the frozen bottles in the bottom.
- Pick up the deceased person using a sheet (under the body, in the same way that

nurses do) and place the body on top of the frozen bottles. Ensure you do this with the necessary awareness of safety for the backs and knees of those lifting the corpse

- Renew the frozen bottles when necessary.

### Other things to be aware of when keeping a body at home

- Rigor mortis sets in slowly within four hours of the death. The body will start to soften again within three days.
- Illness and humidity can cause the body to deteriorate quickly if not kept at the correct cooling temperature.
- Others may try to dissuade you, but you have the right to keep the dead person at home for 5 days *if* the body can be kept at the correct temperature.
- Any discharge/clean up material from the body must be considered contaminated waste and be placed in a heavy-duty plastic bag for correct disposal. Ask your local health department where to dispose of this.

### Finally

- Plan the funeral as soon as possible.
- Buy a coffin, or have one made by a family member/friend, or check if your local men's shed will make one. *See information at the back of the booklet.*

## WHEN SOMEONE DIES IN HOSPITAL

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- You can stay with the dead person as long as you need to, depending on the hospital. If there are objections, ask to see the regulations. How much time you need is variable and intensely personal.
- In some circumstances, if the person is badly damaged, you may be advised against seeing the person, but you can insist, if this is what you want to do. Contact a friend or ask for a counsellor in the hospital to support you with this.
- If you are doing a home burial without a funeral director involved, you will need to inform the hospital of your intentions. Ask if the body can stay in the hospital mortuary until arrangements are made to pick up the body.
- It is legal to take possession of a body from an institute and transfer it to your home. You will need to provide the necessary forms to collect the body. Check with the authorities.
- The body needs to be transported in a suitable vehicle, in a body bag and/or preferably in a coffin. You may need to provide four people to lift the body from the hospital trolley into your own coffin. They do not have to provide you with assistance.
- The executor of the will owns the body. Whoever is picking up the body may need written authorization from the executor.

## FOLLOWING THE DEATH

### First things to be done

- The dead person needs to be seen by their own doctor within 48 hours of the death. If there is to be a cremation, you can ask the doctor to bring the 'Attending Practitioner's Cremation Certificate'. If the doctor is satisfied, s/he will fill out the certificate stating the cause of death (PR315), and also the cremation certificate if required. (This will be taken care of by the funeral director if you are having one).
- If a burial in a cemetery or a cremation is to take place a funeral director will need to be contacted.
- Before you make any decisions, phone around and negotiate the arrangements and costs with different funeral directors.
- However, do decide what you want to do yourself and how actively you want to be involved. Ask what they allow you to do, including the costs, in order to compare.

### Questions to ask the funeral director

- Can you hire the funeral director for *part* of the process only?
- Can you use their cooling facilities for some of the time e.g. bringing the body home for a day before the funeral?
- Make sure that you can provide your own (regulation built) coffin if you decide to do so. Coffins can be expensive.
- Can they help with some of the paper work, if you cannot do it yourself? Be careful what you agree to and what you sign.
- Do they allow you to use your own transportation?
- If making these enquiries is too difficult, have someone else do it for you.

### Whoever orders the funeral is responsible for payment of the bills involved

- This person can be reimbursed from the deceased person's estate at a later date.

### A destitute burial

- This can be arranged by the social worker at the hospital but only if the person had no assets and there is no family to take responsibility.

## CORONER'S INVOLVEMENT FOLLOWING A DEATH

When a death requires the involvement of a coroner, it is generally because specific circumstances exist. It does not suggest fault on any person's part.

### Specific circumstances for coroner's involvement can include:

- The person dying suddenly or unexpectedly with the cause being unknown.
- The doctor not providing a medical certificate stating the cause of death.

- The deceased not having seen a doctor for 3 months prior to the death.
- The death occurring under anaesthetic or within 24 hours after an anaesthetic.
- The deceased meeting a violent or unusual death, or dying under suspicious or unusual circumstances.

A government medical officer will carry out a post-mortem at an allocated hospital.

You can appeal against a post-mortem if circumstances point to a health condition that was current although the deceased had not seen a doctor for 3 months prior to the death. For example, if there was a known heart condition but the deceased didn't seek medical attention and died of a heart attack while people were giving CPR, then you would have a case to put forward. The next of kin could contact the Coroner's office, and they will give you the relevant details to put forward the appeal. Such an appeal may be taken into consideration with the police report that is written after the police have attended the scene of an unexpected death. You might, however, also want to take into account that a post-mortem will ascertain the cause of death if that is important to you to know.

The coroner and coroner's hospital need to be informed

- If you are planning to have an open coffin.
- If you are planning a home burial that does not involve a funeral director.

If, after the post-mortem, the family wants the body at their home, they can ask the mortuary transport provider if they can deliver from the coroner's hospital directly to their home. If not, the body can be delivered to your local hospital and picked up from there in a private vehicle.

If the body is delivered to a funeral director, s/he will then take full responsibility for it.

Another consideration, however, is that legally a family can only have the body at home for 5 days after death. Although a post-mortem could happen within 4 days, that is rare. It usually takes 5 to 10 days. In that case, the family needs to contact the Director General of the Health Department to explain their circumstances and request an extension of the 5-day home vigil period. A strong case needs to be presented for the practices that will be employed to delay decomposition of the body.

## **DEATH OF A BABY**

The death of a baby is a very tragic event that needs particular consideration to provide maximum support and care for the parents and family involved. The following advice can help to provide solace in the knowledge that ultimate care is given.

A stillborn baby

- A baby born at twenty weeks or more gestation, or weighing at least 400 grams, that has not breathed after delivery.
- By law the birth must be registered in the normal way. Next of kin can apply for a birth certificate. No death certificate is issued.

- Burial or cremation is a legal requirement. You are not required to have a funeral ceremony.

### A miscarriage or abortion

- A baby delivered before twenty weeks, or weighing less than 400 grams, is regarded as a miscarriage.
- There are no legal requirements.
- If you want to, you can request that you take the foetus home for your own private ceremony and/or disposal.
- The parents can do a burial if they choose to.

### A death requiring a coronial inquest

- If the child dies within 24 hours of a surgical operation.
- If the doctor cannot certify the cause of death.
- If the baby dies suddenly.
- You can insist on spending as much time as you need to with the baby before the post-mortem. Some hospitals have a cradle-cot (cooling device). Ask about this.
- The post-mortem is carried out in Sydney or Newcastle and the baby is then brought back to the local hospital. At the time of publication, there is no fee involved for this.
- When the paperwork is completed, the family can take the baby for burial or cremation.

## HOME BURIAL

### Things that need to be done before a death

- Contact your local Council for the regulations and 'Application for Private Burial' form.
- Inquire about what is needed in terms of the right of way to the burial site.
- Decide whether to have one individual gravesite or a private cemetery on the land you have chosen.
- If the land is communally owned, all owners must give consent.
- You will need the area surveyed, locating the gravesite and the property boundaries.
- To apply to the local Council for approval, you must present them with the following:
  - Surveyor's plan
  - Signed approval from other owners, if this is applicable
  - 'Application for private burial' form filled out.

### Prepare the grave

- The grave needs to be 90cm wide x 2.3metres long.
- The upper surface of the coffin has to be a minimum of 900mm below natural surface level of the soil where it is buried.

- You can hire a backhoe as this is a big job.
- Place three or four planks across the hole.
- For a shroud-burial the same regulations are required.
- Vertical burials are also possible. The same regulations are required. You may require a pole digger.

### When ready for burial

- Ensure the edges of the burial hole are stable. Lie two or three long ropes beside the planks across the hole, these will be used to lower the coffin.
- Have plenty of strong people on hand to lower the coffin. It may be a good idea to wear gloves for this task. Also instruct everyone to be safe when lifting, using knees, core muscles etc and to listen to instructions. Request support if needed rather than be at risk.
- Six people will be needed as coffin bearers. Be aware of their different heights.
- Before placing the lid on the coffin, ensure those involved know this is about to happen and allow private time if needed.
- Supply a few shovels for people who wish to help fill in the grave. It is a big job.

### After the burial

- It is necessary to have a marker to identify the place of the burial.
- You can choose a wooden cross, a chosen rock, a rock pile, a plaque or artwork, whatever seems appropriate.

## BURIAL IN A SHROUD

‘Clause 63 of the Public Health Regulation 2012’ states that, unless otherwise approved by the Director-General of Health, the body of a deceased person must not be buried or cremated unless it is placed in a coffin and the lid of the coffin securely sealed. *(See government website link given at back of booklet).*

Therefore –

- If you wish to bury the body without a coffin or casket, you must seek the approval of the Chief Health Officer of the Local Health District.
- You need to submit an application on the prescribed template clearly stating - your relationship to the deceased, your reason for seeking an exemption, whether you are applying for exemption in a general or a particular case, whether an agreement has been negotiated, and the name of the cemetery and cemetery manager where the body is to be buried.
- Wrapping of the body must be in at least four layers of cotton/linen sheeting which is able to prevent any leakage from the body.
- The body must be contained in a coffin until placed into a grave.

- If the body is reasonably believed to be infected with a prescribed infectious disease, it must be buried in a coffin for public health reasons.
- The body must be prepared in a mortuary registered with the NSW Ministry of Health.

## Legal requirements

### Before burial

- Doctor's certificate of death (issued by doctor or coroner).
- Application to the Council or cemetery authority for permission to bury (supplied by Council).
- The Council approved gravedigger contacted.
- Council's authority to bury (issued by council once they have processed your application).
- Death registration notice (supplied by the Registrar of Birth's, Death's and Marriages).

### Afterwards

- If a funeral director is not involved, a family member needs to contact Births, Deaths and Marriages on 137788(NSW) to register the death within 7 days of the burial.
- A wooden cross or anything else can be used for a short-term marker until a more permanent headstone can be provided.
- Headstones can be in the form of a sculpture as long as they are in accordance with the Australian standard for headstones.

## **BURIAL IN A CEMETERY**

Legally, all burials in council cemeteries must be carried out by a funeral director. Make some decisions before contacting the funeral director.

### Some suggestions

- Keep the dead person at home until the funeral.
- Use your own vehicle to transport the coffined body to the cemetery.
- Have a service at the graveside.
- Have the funeral director collect the dead person from the hospital or your home.

## **A CREMATION**

You will need a funeral director

Before you contact a funeral director, decide how actively involved you want to be.

If a person has written instructions not to be cremated, a cremation permit will not be issued.

### A home-made coffin

- A coffin must be built to approved regulations to be received by a crematorium and funeral director. If the coffin does not meet regulations, you may be asked to purchase one on the spot and transfer the body to the new coffin.
- There must be a nameplate on the coffin which will be fixed to the side of the cremator and accompany the ashes through every stage of the refinement process until transfer to their ashes box for disposition.
- Plastic, metal or glass must not be put into the coffin.

### Transportation

- A hearse (also called a funeral coach) is supplied by the funeral director, unless
- You want to use your own car to transport the dead person to the crematorium and follow all the necessary regulations.

### Legal requirements

The funeral director will assist you with the required forms if you want him/her to do so. Let the funeral director know what you want to do.-

- Certificate of death - supplied by a doctor.
- Corroboration by second doctor of cause of death (organised by first doctor).
- Death registration notice - supplied by the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages.
- Application to the crematorium for permission to cremate - supplied by the crematorium.
- Crematorium's authority to cremate - issued by the crematorium once they have received your application.
- Nameplate for the coffin as required.

## **MAKING A COFFIN**

Only coffins meeting or exceeding the standard will be accepted for cremation.

### A minimum standard for the construction of a coffin

- The size of the coffin, generally equal to the size of the body, needs to be no larger than 620mm wide, 550mm high and 2100mm long.
- The weight of the coffin, including the dead person, should not exceed 130kg.
- The material the coffin is made of needs to be an easily combustible timber that is strong enough to allow unsupported movement. (Suggestion: non-toxic, untreated pine floor boards).

- The lining of the coffin must be heavy-duty plastic and include layers of absorbent natural materials like cotton (e.g. a futon or old woollen blankets).
- The lid of the coffin – it must be possible to fix it securely in place, preferably with nails, screws or clips. For cremation use steel.
- The base of the coffin must be smooth with no projections or extended edges on the side.
- The handholds of the coffin must be multiple and made of e.g. wood or rope. Any handles made of non-combustible material must be easily removable.
- The coffin must have a *name plate* at a crematorium (rather than any other identification e.g. name tag). It is a legal requirement for cremation because the name plate is fixed to the side of the cremator as it enters the cremator and accompanies the ashes through each stage of the refinement process until transferred to the ashes-box or urn.

### Some suggested variations to the coffin

- It does not have to be flute shaped, it can be rectangular.
- It can be painted and decorated in a way that reflects the dead person's life story.
- It can have layers of absorbent material in the bottom, then be covered by e.g. woodchips, shredded paper, fresh herbs.
- A cloth can be placed in the coffin, allowing it to hang over the sides.
- A doona and pillow can be used in the coffin.
- No synthetic material can be placed in the coffin.

## TRANSPORTATION

### Transporting the body

- A funeral director can be contacted to transport the body but be aware that, once a funeral director is engaged, he takes on full responsibility.
- A van, station wagon, truck or utility can be used for transporting the body. Preferably in a coffin, but a body-bag may be permitted - check with your local authorities.
- Measure the coffin beforehand to make sure it will fit in the vehicle.

### The Health Acts require

- That the body be in a body bag or wrapped in plastic.  
(Nowhere in the health regulations does it state a requirement to line the back of the vehicle with heavy duty plastic if transporting in a private vehicle).
- That a dead person arrives at a crematorium or cemetery in a coffin.
- That the duration of travel is not more than eight hours.

If travelling a distance, use an air-conditioned vehicle and place frozen water bottles around the body.

## ORGANISING A FUNERAL

### Decide who is organising

- A funeral service usually takes about one hour. It has a beginning, a middle and an end.
- Everything needs to be completed in time and precisely.
- There are no legal requirements.
- Anyone can lead the service - a friend, family member, celebrant, minister or funeral director.
- Having a team of people supporting the process, with one person co-ordinating, will enable the many tasks to be undertaken with a greater sense of community and load-sharing.
- The person leading the service need not say much, however they do need to be able to hold the space energetically and keep the service flowing smoothly. They need to be flexible, allowing time for the unexpected, and able to rein in any speaker who may take over the service. This person leading the service needs to have a logical approach and be assertive and clear and not too grief stricken, as many officials may refuse requests out of being too cautious.
- Have music playing as people are arriving.
- You may want to give an order of service and possibly a flower to each person. These are both optional.
- Helpers need to be very aware of not taking over, of listening carefully to what the grieving family wants, and encouraging them to make the decisions wherever possible.
- All instructions should be in writing.
- Have a letter from next of kin authorising people to do official tasks, e.g. negotiating with the funeral directors.

### Tasks

- Assist family in negotiating with the funeral director and ensuring that their wishes are followed.
- Organise the coffin or shrouds.
- Organise appropriate transport.
- Make a list of who needs to be contacted.
- Organise all legal paper work.
- Ensure time and place of funeral service/burial.
- Submit newspaper articles if desired. Death notices in local papers will require confirmation of death either by a funeral director or a death certificate.
- Deal with incoming and outgoing telephone calls.
- Write an obituary, eulogy or a tribute. A story of the person's life, highlighting important events. This can be read out at the service and later placed in the newspaper if desired.
- Are there any practical things to consider such as child care, cleaning, cooking, catering for the funeral etc?

## Create an order of service (optional)

- Find someone who is proficient with a graphic design program who would be willing to put together an order of service. The format can vary from the traditional A4 sheet folded in half to a postcard size memento that may have a quote superimposed on a photograph of the deceased.
- A photo of the dead person on the front.
- Words of songs to be sung.
- Poems or quotes
- How the service will end.
- Where a gathering after the funeral will be held.

## Where will the service be held?

- In the home, garden, park or at the ocean
- Church /chapel.
- Graveside.

## Suggestions for the service

- Flowers, candles, incense or other relevant items. Be aware that incense can be challenging for some guests.
- Music - A choir? Live music? Pre-recorded? If so, what media is required?
- Order of people speaking. Will the microphone be made available for guests to speak spontaneously? If so, who will monitor this. Ensure the invitation asks guests to speak for a few minutes only.
- A photograph and some small personal belongings of the dead person.
- A memorial book for people to write in. This can be an art book with coloured pencils and pens for people to be creative, or a guest signing book.
- Small cards and pens for people to write messages to place in or on the coffin.
- A corkboard and pins for photos.
- Someone to take photos or to video.
- Is it possible for the dead person's pet to be at the service?
- Do you want guests to place a flower sprig on the coffin at the end of the service? If so, place flowers in a basket at waist height so that guests can just easily reach in and take a flower.
- Refreshments following the service.

## **SERVICE AT A CREMATORIUM**

- Anyone can conduct the service - minister, priest, celebrant, family member, friend.
- Time allotted for each service is usually one hour. You can request more time (and will most likely have to pay).
- The service can be carried out in the chapel or in the grounds.
- The arrangements can be made according to your wishes -
  - You can arrange the chairs
  - You can have no chairs or use cushions instead

- Create a circle and have the coffin in the middle
- The coffin may be open or closed
- Provide your own music, live or taped
- Provide your own refreshments.
- In some crematoriums you can witness the burning of the cofined person, but you may have to insist on accompanying the body all the way as it is not the usual process. Some crematoriums do not allow this due to OH&S policy.
- Many funeral directors are able to offer cremation capsules, a simple and cost-effective cardboard box specifically designed for no service cremations.
- The cremation takes about one and half hours to complete. It is usually about 24 hours before you can collect the remains. The crematorium will provide a container for the ashes or you can bring your own container.
- Cremations are carried out on weekdays and Saturday mornings. Some crematoriums also open on Sundays by request, possibly at an extra fee.

## A MEMORIAL SERVICE

A memorial service is one where the coffin is absent. This can be carried out at a later date and at any place.

### Some suggestions

- A gathering of friends in a favourite place of the dead person.
- In a park. At the beach. At home.
- Play music the dead person loved or that the family associates with them.
- Place flowers into a nearby stream, or the sea.
- Form a circle with people saying what they will miss about the person who died.
- Supply refreshments.
- End by doing something uplifting and connecting. Go for a walk along the beach. Play music, create a mandala.

## THE GRIEVING PROCESS

The way we respond to a significant loss is complex and variable. It depends on many things including a person's conditioning (internal) and circumstances (external).

Under stress the body produces adrenalin (the fight or flight chemical), endorphins (opiate-like chemicals) and cortisone, which sustains the stress response.

The body may also have -

- A biophysical reaction or shock (more pronounced when death is sudden). This is usually immediate, lessening slowly, and can include - rapid breathing, pale skin, accelerated pulse rate, digestive shutdown. Also, elevated blood pressure and sugar levels, and immunological disturbance.

- A psychophysical reaction, which could produce symptoms that reflect the nature of the death e.g. bad chest pains after a partner has died of a heart attack.
- An emotional reaction, which can manifest in a whole range of feelings including
  - Anxiety, depression, anger, fear
  - Blanking out, frozen, unresponsive, denial
  - Hyperactive, laughing inappropriately, abusive behaviour
  - Irrational decision-making, unusual behaviours and alcohol abuse
  - No sleep or not wanting to get out of bed.

Generally, the chemical reactions taper off around seven weeks after the death. It is nature's way of protecting and allowing time for the body to adapt to a new situation.

## FURTHER MATTERS RELATING TO DEATH

### ADVANCE HEALTH CARE DIRECTIVES, POWER OF ATTORNEY, ENDURING GUARDIANSHIP AND WILLS

- Before death, make sure to follow the directives of Advance Care, Power of Attorney and Enduring Guardianship.
- After death, these are no longer valid: the will is then the only legal document that is recognised and followed.

### LEAVING YOUR BODY FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

- This involves a written agreement between you and the research institute.
- Only bodies from metropolitan areas are considered.
- Contact the institution to find out what and how this is to be arranged.

### EUTHANASIA/ ASSISTED DYING

Euthanasia is illegal in Australia on a federal level, but states and territories have legislated on the issue. It was legal for a period in the Northern Territory and in November 2017 legislation to allow assisted suicide passed the Parliament of Victoria, but will not come into effect until mid-2019. Euthanasia is legal in Switzerland and you can access their services as an Australian citizen.

Any patient can legally elect not to receive treatment for a terminal illness and can also elect to have their life support turned off. They can also elect to stop eating and drinking, unless declared not 'compos mentis' (not having full control of their mind) by a psychiatrist.

*(information copied from a Government website)*

## WILLS

This information is for NSW jurisdiction only.

- The executor of the will has the right to the body.
- The executor of the will can override the family's wishes.
- Have two executors to share the load, and in case one is not available.
- If there is no will, one needs to apply to the Court of 'Letters of Administration'.
- It is possible to write a will without a solicitor, but if it involves a complicated family situation, a business or estate worth more than a certain amount, see a solicitor.
- After a death, a certified copy of the will or probate needs to be taken to the bank, etc. to change names on the accounts. The accounts will get frozen for the time it takes to sort out the estate.
- For a vehicle, take a certified copy of the will to the RTA to change the name on the registration.
- Some States are now recognising 'domestic partners' after 2 years together, whatever sex.
- Friends, lovers, carers and significant others have no right to inherit anything unless stated in a will.
- If you want to leave instructions regarding your funeral it's best not to write it in your Will, as usually the will is only read after the funeral.

*For more information on Wills, Estates and Funerals, the book "Rest Assured" is available at all Public libraries. Also, see relevant websites at the end of this publication.*

## DEATH AND DYING CELEBRATIONS WHICH MAY INSPIRE YOU

### A CELEBRATION OF RALF'S LIFE

told by Dorin

As I took my turn shoveling the loose shale into Ralf's grave I felt an immense sense of achievement. We'd done it! Our own home funeral. The first in the Shire.

And we had done it all. There were no priests, no undertakers, no fancy coffin and hearse, no fake grass and hydraulic lifts at the graveside.

We were self-sufficiency in action. Two friends laid out Ralf's body at my home, where he died. Another two made a simple elegant, plywood coffin. The miraculous 2litre milk bottles of frozen water provided cooling for a day, allowing us to keep his body with us and hold a vigil. The hospital allowed us to use the morgue for the rest of the time. We had my VW kombi van for transport, then a 4WD ute for the last section up to our own bush cemetery in the trees.

The community members had done all the paper work with council, cleared the lantana away and dug the grave by hand. My 'event co-ordinator' sewed up dozens of stark white pennants and hung them from graceful black bamboo poles to decorate the site. Clumps of

the same pennants fluttered from the entrance to the property, the track to the cemetery and my studio, where we laid Ralf with flowers and candle light for the final viewing.

Friends were waiting for us, on this soft almost-rainy winter afternoon with the quiet beat of a native American drum and the drone of a didge. The brightly coloured crowd spread along the hillside above the grave, looking out through the trees and across the valley.

A friend led the ceremony, - moving tributes and poems. We lowered the coffin into the deep hand-dug grave and all filed past, throwing in a handful or spade-full of dirt. Then the real shovelling began, first the men of the community, then others joined in – men women and children – all working briskly until we had the earth heaped back in place. After the sadness and emotion of the days before, it was a great release to be able to do something physical, to use our bodies and shovel that dirt.

Dusk fell and we walked back down to the nearest house to a roaring bonfire, a bring-a-plate feast, music, and to the delight of the kids, fireworks.

The whole event just flowed without a hitch. We even took our own videos and photos. The successful planning and conducting our own funeral, so many friends coming together, all this gave me an energy that helped through the difficult days to come.

As a community too we gained, for facing death together creates strong bonds. And we were so proud of what we had achieved. Even more so when we tallied up the costs. We spent about \$800 establishing the cemetery – a capital investment that will serve the community for generations. The funeral itself – a mere \$200.....And that would have been exactly in keeping with Ralf's own wishes.

In death, as in life, he was still on the leading edge

## JENNY'S HOME DEATH WITH HER FAMILY

Told by Jenny's partner Lorus

Jenny was a caring and nurturing mother to her four children, Yemaya aged six, Yarnam aged nine, Rhian aged eighteen, Shanti aged thirteen.

She helped run the Bellinghen Homebirth Group through which she was able to help many mothers at their home births. Our own children were born at home too.

When Jenny was told she had breast cancer and only had a few months to live, she began opening herself more fully to the experience. Knowing she would soon die and leave her beloved family, she began planning carefully how she would like to die.

She asked me to keep her body at home after she died so she would be with us until she was buried. She decided she wanted a home death and funeral, with no funeral directors involved, and to be buried on the land close to her dear family.

Jenny felt positive about dying and drew strength through her faith and love with the Holy Mother. She wanted to always be present and loving to her children, so she gave much thought to how she would continue mothering after her death. She decided to express her love to each of her children by writing them birthday cards and wrapping them individual

gifts to be opened on successive birthdays. This helped Jenny to feel empowered, knowing that she would be continuing her mothering after her death.

On the 1st of August 2000, Jenny died both beautifully and peacefully at home with all the care and support of her family, friend's, nurses and the well set-up Palliative Care team.

After Jenny died, we switched on an air conditioner and packed 2 litre milk containers of frozen water around her for 20 hours. Then with the children, we washed Jenny, rubbed Rosemary oil into her body, dressed her in the clothes she had chosen to wear, and placed her onto a sheet. A friend made a bamboo coffin for Jenny.

We packed frozen milk containers, this time into the coffin, and then we used the sheet she was lying on to lift her into the coffin. Every four to six hours we replaced the frozen bottles. We did this for three days and experienced no problems in keeping her body cold enough.

On the third day after her death, we had a service for Jenny in the house in town and then late in the afternoon we transported Jenny's body in a van back to her bush home and place of rest in the nearby forest.

Over the next 49 days we followed the Tibetan Buddhist custom of helping Jenny on her journey by meditating and saying prayers each week at the time Jenny died. This ritual also helped us in our grief. It brought us together with close friends, which we really needed.

On the 49th day, family and friends gathered together to celebrate Jenny's transition.

Throughout Jenny's cancer and dying, we both were as open and honest as possible to ourselves and our children, always making sure our children were a part of this process. I believe this has helped us as a family to move through our sad loss.

## DEATH OF A SON

Told by Aishwayra

When I received the phone call to tell me that my twenty-one-year-old son had died suddenly and traumatically as a pedestrian in a roadside accident my first reaction was a spontaneous and primal scream.

I was working as a grief counsellor and educator at the time that he died and was especially interested in how meaningful rituals assist the bereaved and also the deceased. My first thoughts after the ear-piercing scream settled into wails and sobs was, that I wanted to bring my son home so that I could say goodbye in my own time and my own way.

I thought that the general social trend in Australian society was conservative in approaching traumatic death and body viewing. I also considered that other cultures or societies such as Japan, Bali, and Israel appeared to take time to mourn fully. The solid rituals and rites of passage associated with Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist religious traditions appealed to me and appeared to have a healthier approach than the 3-day mourning period of Australian work-orientated culture.

I had knowledge from my training in grief education and experiences with clients that to see

Sunny, touch him and talk to him would assist me to accept the loss as physically real and also to begin my healing journey, which I believed would be a difficult process over time. I had a personal awareness that I was not comfortable in institutional settings such as funeral homes and that to express my emotions fully I would need privacy. I also had the realization that I had an eclectic religious approach to life and that the rituals that would be most meaningful would draw upon this rich mix of attitudes and philosophies about life, death and life after death.

I had the knowledge that I could not have Sunny home for more than eight hours without him being embalmed. For this procedure to take place he had to have a certificate to state that he had no infectious diseases. I was fortunate that I was able to have my needs met and on the fifth day after Sunny died he arrived home for a three day stay before the wake was to take place.

Prior to Sunny arriving home I knew it would be wise to ask what Sunny's injuries were and what he would look like. I knew this information would assist my family and myself in preparing for the shock of seeing him.

I was told that he had severe head injuries and that he had several bruises on his face, a wound at the back of the head that was repaired. I believe this information did assist in preparing us and that even though he was injured I loved him so deeply that his injuries would not put me off the strong desire to hold him and kiss him and comfort him in his darkest hour of need. I thought that the rites of passage for him were essential components of helping him in his transition from life to death and also essential for the family and community's needs in dealing with his sudden and untimely loss.

Having Sunny home was extremely beneficial, it was a precious time in which to say our final goodbyes and resolve past conflict. The rituals we performed with him were uplifting, enriching and satisfying experiences. They assisted us at a physical, psychological and spiritual level. As a family, we created these rituals from our eclectic religious views that we derived from traveling overseas as well as living in Australia's rich, diverse and multi-cultural society. All family members and friends had time to add their own unique needs to the rituals as a way of finding acceptance and meaning in Sunny's loss.

At the end of these three days we had a wake that went long into the night. Sunny was physically present and his coffin was open. A hundred or more people took the courage to say their goodbyes personally. Three days after the wake we had a cremation ceremony also with the coffin lid open. Flowers and notes expressing love and goodbyes covered his body and he looked glorious. All of these ceremonies were important steps for our family in meeting our own needs and also those of the community, and at the same time they leave us with memories that are satisfying and positive. At six weeks, we divided the ashes and Sunny's friends had a memorial service with their share, they designed their own rituals and ceremony and found this beneficial and healing in assisting them to gain closure.

On the first anniversary I visited the accident site and met the truck driver, we placed a cross and flowers at the roadside. The truck driver found this an essential and healing ritual to perform for healing his personal shock and grief. After this ceremony I was able to put to rest the horrible images I had regarding Sunny's last moments of life. I now knew that he had fallen by tripping on a traffic island and that the truck had not run over his body, his neck was broken by falling hard against the wheels rather than under them. The ongoing rituals over time assisted in the healing process after Sunny's sudden, traumatic and violent death.

## RESOURCES:

- **BOOKS AND ARTICLES**

*"What to do when someone dies"* - CentreLink

*"Funeral Rights"* - Rob Larkins

*"A consumer guide to funerals"* - [www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au](http://www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au)

*"The best death: how to die well"* – Sarah Winch, 2017, UQP

*"Coping with grief"* - M McKissock. Bereavement Care, PO Box 327, Epping 2121.

*"How to write an Inspiring Funeral or Memorial Ceremony"* – [www.wendyhaynes.com](http://www.wendyhaynes.com)

- **ORGANISATIONS AND WEBSITES**

**Find Legal Answers (State Library NSW)** (02) 9273 1414

[http://www.legalanswers.sl.nsw.gov.au/guides/wills\\_estates/when\\_someone\\_dies.html](http://www.legalanswers.sl.nsw.gov.au/guides/wills_estates/when_someone_dies.html)

**Funeral Director's Association of NSW Ltd** [www.fdansw.com.au](http://www.fdansw.com.au) 1800 613 913 NSW

**Funerals, legal requirements:**

<https://www.cotansw.com.au/MediaPDFs/Funerals-Legal-Requirements-2015.pdf>

**Green funerals:** <https://www.gatheredhere.com.au/green-funerals-australia/>

<http://www.ourcommunity.com.au/files/JoinIn/Grief.pdf>

this website has links and information on many services and websites about dying

**Information about dying and funerals:** <http://www.naturaldeathcarecentre.org/>

Lismore, NSW. They have a cooling plate.

**Natural burial grounds:** <http://earthfunerals.org.au/>

**Port Kembla community funeral service** has cooling plate and general info

<https://www.ourcommunityproject.org.au/tender-funerals-back>

**Register of Births, Deaths & Marriages** [www.bdm.nsw.gov.au](http://www.bdm.nsw.gov.au) 13 77 88

**Shrouds:** [http://www1.health.nsw.gov.au/pds/ActivePDSDocuments/PD2013\\_048.pdf](http://www1.health.nsw.gov.au/pds/ActivePDSDocuments/PD2013_048.pdf)

<http://cindea.ca/shrouds.html>

**Taking care of the body:** <http://www.naturaldeathcarecentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/7.-Practical-Care-of-the-Body.pdf>

- **SUPPORT GROUPS**

**Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement** 03 9265 2100 or Freecall 1800 642 066

[www.grief.org.au](http://www.grief.org.au)

**Beyond Blue** 1300 22 4636 [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

**Good Grief / Seasons for Growth** 02 9963 6300 <https://www.goodgrief.org.au/seasons-for-growth>

**Groundswell, dying to know** [www.thegroundswellproject.com/](http://www.thegroundswellproject.com/) Talking about death to create social change and to build death literacy

**Lifeline** (Head office) 13 11 14 [www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

**MIINDALA** (NALAG) in Bellingen NSW area. Providing services relating to dying, death and bereavement. Has a cooling plate. Phone: 0448 084 792 Email: miindala2013@gmail.com. Website: [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)

**NALAG**. National Association of Loss and Grief (NSW) Inc. Email: [nalag@hwy.com.au](mailto:nalag@hwy.com.au)

Phone: 0439 922 201. Website: [www.nalag.org.au](http://www.nalag.org.au)

**National Centre for Childhood Grief** 1300 654 556 [www.childhoodgrief.org.au](http://www.childhoodgrief.org.au)

**Palliative Care Australia** 02 6232 0700 [www.palliativecare.org.au](http://www.palliativecare.org.au)

**SIDS & Kids Online** <https://rednose.com.au/>

**Stillbirth and Neonatal Death Support** (03) 8652 5020 <http://www.sands.org.au/>

**Support after Suicide** 03 9427 9899 [www.jss.org.au/content/view/95/128/](http://www.jss.org.au/content/view/95/128/)

**The Compassionate Friends Australia**  
<http://www.tcfaustralia.org.au/>

- **GENERAL**

**Complaints** to Department of Fair Trading [www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au](http://www.fairtrading.nsw.gov.au) 13 32 20

**Cooling plates - available at:**

- Bellingen, Coffs Harbour NSW, Miindala, 0448 084 792 Email: miindala2013@gmail.com
- Earlwood NSW 2206 [contact@victoriaspencecelebrant.com](mailto:contact@victoriaspencecelebrant.com) +61(0)431 123 129
- Lismore, Byron Bay NSW, Contact: Zenith Virago, Phone: (+61) 0427 924 310
- Port Kembla, NSW community Centre (02) 4276 3433

**Hand crafted coffins**

Individual boxes for ashes. Bim Morton, Ph: 0427 462 585  
<http://bimmortonfurniture.com> [bimmorton@yahoo.com.au](mailto:bimmorton@yahoo.com.au)

Leaving Lightly – Earth Friendly Products – Byron Bay  
<http://cardboardcoffinsaustralia.com.au/index.html> 0427 224 142

**Life Art Cardboard coffins.** [www.lifeart.com.au](http://www.lifeart.com.au)

**Local Men's Sheds** may be supportive in making a coffin to your (legal) design for a very small price.