

Embalming

At our natural burial grounds embalming is not permitted because of the toxic chemicals used. This is because of the adverse effect on the soil, soil organisms, ground water and ecology of our sites. We also think that embalming is an unnecessary and invasive procedure and that cold storage is preferable.

However, people often ask us what embalming actually means.

This article written by an embalmer, published in The Guardian on Saturday 16 February 2008, explains:

By Karen Koutandos Embalmer

The body is brought out of the fridge and removed from the body bag or the sheets in which it has been wrapped. I gently clean the deceased with a formaldehyde or disinfectant spray. The body might be quite clamped with rigor mortis, so I massage the hands and limbs to work it out, then make an incision to raise an artery so I can inject the formaldehyde. I tend to use the brachial artery under the armpit, or the femoral artery in the groin area, to avoid incisions being seen, which can be stressful for the families when they come for a viewing. As the formaldehyde flows through the body, you begin to get colour and a more lifelike appearance. The features will plump out slightly and the deceased will look less drawn.

If a body is going abroad, the strength and amount of fluid used is increased, to ensure preservation and sanitation for a longer period. After the formaldehyde, I drain the body of blood and fluid from the organs and chest cavity. I make an incision just under the rib cage and insert a metal suction tool, known as a trocar, attached to a suction pump. I then puncture the internal organs to drain the fluid. I remove the contents of the intestines, bowels and bladder, too, as these can give off gases and smell. I don't come into contact with the fluids. It's very clean and tidy. After I have drained the body, I distribute a litre of cavity fluid between the thoracic and abdominal cavities so that all the tissues are saturated and do not smell. Although the bowels will have already been emptied, I put an incontinence pad on the body to protect the clothing and the coffin. We have to take out pacemakers because they can't go into the crematorium. Usually you are told that the person has a pacemaker that needs to come out, but if you are not, you can see the incision where it has gone in.

Next, I pack the throat and nose with cotton wool to stop fluid seepage. If the deceased doesn't have teeth, I put cotton around the mouth to plump it out a little; if they have dentures, I put them in place. I then stitch the mouth closed from the inside. Sometimes glue is used but I do not like the white residue it can leave after it has dried. I dry the eyes and insert plastic half-moon caps under the lids to help them hold their shape, and a touch of Vaseline helps to hold them closed. If the eyes are not dried, they can give the appearance of having a tear, which may be distressing to the family. I will wash and style the hair, ensure that the men are shaved and any nasal and ear hair removed. Nails are cleaned and cut. It's a myth that your hair and nails keep growing after you are dead - what actually happens is that your skin retracts, so they appear longer.

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