

# 7. Practical Care of the Body

## Death and Dying Matters

These information sheets have been created to demystify some beliefs and misconceptions around dying, death and funerals. They are designed to inform and empower individuals as well as communities, by providing practical information to help make better decisions and more considered choices in relation to end of life matters. This is not anything new, rather a return to a traditional approach, where families and friends are involved at every stage. Choices may be influenced by culture, beliefs, community, finances or sustainability issues.

These sheets may assist you to:

- better understand what is involved in the process of dying, death and bereavement
- participate more fully in any of the stages
- complete the relevant and important legal paperwork
- talk to others about your or their wishes and needs
- clarify your or their instructions around dying and after death
- create a more meaningful funeral to honour and celebrate a life
- have an easier and healthier bereavement

It was common in the past – and still is in many cultures – for loved ones to take care of and prepare the body. If you have been caring for someone during their dying, then caring for their body after death may be an easy and natural extension. Handling a dead body is something many people are not familiar with, but it can be a natural progression to caring for the sick and especially the elderly. It can be confronting – especially with the body of a child or young person – but also incredibly meaningful and beneficial in your loss. Many people find it useful, healing, intimate, sacred or vital to take care of the body. It may just be too difficult, or not possible. It is a personal choice.

If preparing the body seems challenging, it may be useful to ask for help from someone who is familiar with this experience – like a nurse – or someone who is willing and feels confident to help.

If the death is sudden, accidental or unexpected, taking care of the body may feel daunting because of your shock, emotional state, or the condition of the body. There may also have been an autopsy, but this does not prevent you from preparing the body. Discuss any worries or fears with the professionals around you, find out what is involved, consider what you want to do, prepare yourself, and then decide whether or not you want to do it. If it is too hard, let it go.

If you decide to go ahead, you should consider the appropriate and respectful way to do it. Some will create a sense of ritual by using music and candles. Laughter and tears can both be elements in the process. It is useful to have a board – like a tray – so that you can move the body if required. This is easier than carrying the body or moving it with a sheet.

Rigor mortis is caused by chemical changes in the muscles after death. It causes the limbs to become stiff

and difficult to move or manipulate. It begins anywhere between three and six hours after death, and eases anywhere between twelve and seventy-two hours after death. However, after death the body remains somewhat taut, and never becomes really floppy again.

It is not a legal requirement to embalm a body, it is a choice. Most bodies in Australia are not embalmed. If a body is not embalmed it is important to keep it cold to prevent further deterioration. In NSW a body can be kept at home for up to five days. More often it is kept for one to three days. Here are some of the methods to keep the body cold:

- Ideally a **cold plate** can be used. This is a rectangular stainless steel refrigerated plate, roughly shoulder to knee length. It has a motor to drive the refrigeration and is powered by electricity. Detailed instructions should be provided with a cold plate, but in short, it is placed under the body, with something between them, so the skin does not stick to it. You may want to also put a wet sheet over the body.
- **Dry ice** is cold but does not dissolve into water. It evaporates and changes from solid to gas, though leaves condensation on surfaces it touches.
  - It releases carbon dioxide, a gas which can cause light headedness, or worse. As such, you must keep the room ventilated to allow the gas to escape.
  - The skin – living or dead – should be protected from dry ice. Handle it with thick gloves or a towel. Do not touch it with bare skin.
  - Preferably research your local supplier in advance, as they are not always open. You will need an Esky to collect and transport it, and cover it with a towel.
  - The quantity needed is between seven and eleven kilograms per day, depending on the size of the body. Only purchase two days supply as the ice will constantly transform to gas.
  - It may come in blocks or loose, similar to wet ice. Whatever form it takes, make a bed of dry ice to accommodate the whole torso. Using dry ice on a soft surface is sometimes easier than on a hard surface, as the ice will sink into the surface and the body will remain centered. Place a plastic shower curtain and large towel between the ice and the bed, to insulate and absorb the condensation. Ensure the organs are protected by the dry ice, as they decompose more quickly, so consider placing some on top of the abdomen. There must be a protective layer between the dry ice and the body.
  - Since the ice will elevate the body you may want to raise the feet and head to level the body. It is important to position the body so it appears natural and comfortable, even though we know that no pain is being experienced, to avoid any distress to the living.
  - You may also want to put a wet sheet over the body. This can be covered with a sheet or a top cloth.
  - The body will become rigid and cold to touch.
  - If you want to remove the ice from the abdomen when people are visiting, you can replace it with a cold gel pack.
  - Always store dry ice in a Esky and not in your freezer as it can turn off the thermostat.
  - Sometimes **wet ice or frozen containers** are used to keep a body cold. Proceed same as above, but be prepared for the water, change whenever needed.

All of these methods can be complemented by fans and an air conditioner, and keeping the room as cold as you can.

If you have a **body tray**, you don't need to put the body in a coffin until you are ready. This makes it much more accessible to be with or view. You may use something like a door. If you have a coffin, you may want to put some dry ice in the base. If using dry ice in a cardboard coffin, be mindful and expect condensation so wrap it in plastic.

### **Useful information in preparing the body**

Health professional will wear gloves. Be guided by them and the circumstances. You may choose to wear

gloves, or not to.

**Closing the eyes and mouth** is optional, but usual. Gently close the eyelids and place a massage pillow or a Gladbag filled with rice or sand over them for a couple of hours. If the eyes are still not fully closed, you can place a cotton bud tip sized bit of cotton wool underneath the eye lid, or superglue them down (it needs to be applied to a dry surface).

Often after death, the facial expression of the deceased relaxes. If the mouth is open, you can try to close it by:

- Placing a rolled up towel or small pillow underneath the chin and tilting the head forward
- Placing a pillow underneath the head
- Holding the chin in your hand, and closing the mouth for a few minutes at a time
- Looping a scarf or sash underneath the chin, tying it at the top of the head tightly, and removing it after a couple of hours
- Sealing the mouth with superglue (it needs to be applied to a dry surface).

If the body is cold this will help the jaw to remain closed.

**Undressing and dressing the body** is best done before rigor mortis sets in, or after it passes. The limbs of a body will become stiff when the body is kept cold.

It can be difficult to remove clothing from the body, and can be easier to cut it off.

Some people will have left specific instructions about what they want to wear, and these should be followed. If this is not the case then you can simply dress the body in appropriate clothing or wrap it in fabric.

Dressing a body can be the same as dressing a bed bound person. The clothing is often cut at the back and slipped on from the front.

If it is a top garment, put both arms into sleeves and pull the fabric towards the head. Lift the head and pull the garment over. Roll the body from side to side pulling the clothing down a little at a time. Lifting the body and pulling the garment down is an option if you have enough help. You can also cut the clothing up the back and place the arms through the sleeves and cover the front of the body, tucking the clothing underneath.

If it is a bottom garment, put legs in each pant leg and pull toward the waist. If there are two or more people to assist with dressing, someone can lift the hips up while another pulls up the pants.

After dressing the body, place towels or plastic underneath to absorb any body fluids, that may have collected in the body.

**Body fluids** need to be considered:

- the bladder of the body may empty; or you may push down gently on the abdominal/pelvic area before bathing, to help empty the bowel or bladder.
- sometimes fluid collects in the lungs, and drains out of the mouth when turning or moving the body. This can relate to the cause of death. Keep the head elevated during a vigil, or if you are moving the body. Be ready with a cloth at the mouth when turning for washing or dressing.
- you do not need to place cotton in the nasal throat and/or anal passages, unless it is a cultural requirement.
- you may want to cover open wounds with a water proof dressing.
- the use of a cool plate or dry ice soon after death reduces or stops all drainage or odors.

Preparation of the body can also include washing, hair and make up. You may need gloves (optional), a washing basin, several towels, soap, shampoo, hair dryer, creams, make up, oils or perfumes. A tray, massage

table or hospital bed is an ideal location. Also a sheet may need to be placed under the body to assist with moving and turning, though make sure you use good lifting techniques. You may want to cover the body with towels or a sheet.

It is best to have two or more people assist with washing the body, which is similar to giving a bed bound person a sponge bath. Use warm water and soap, add any oils to the water, and change the water as often as is needed. Begin by washing, rinsing and drying the face, ears and neck; then place a towel under the arms and shoulders, wash, rinse and dry. This should be followed by the chest, abdomen and pelvic area. Next, turn the body from the back to the side, using the method outlined here, and wash, rise and dry the back and bottom. Finally, wash the legs and feet.

Washing the hair is best done by two people. Use a draw sheet to move the body to the top of the table. One person should support the head over the edge (the head is often much heavier than you imagine). The other person should place a basin or bucket underneath the head to catch the water; then wet the hair using a jug of clean water, shampoo, condition, and rinse. When this is complete, use a dryer or comb the hair, and style it.

Make up is not essential; but can conceal skin discolorations and wounds. Be guided by whether the person wore makeup when alive. If it was part of who they were use the persons own make up and apply appropriately.

### **Turning the body from the back to the side**

- have two people stand on opposite sides of the bed.
- untuck the draw sheet – a regular sheet placed under the body, used to lift, turn or move the body – roll edges and grip tightly.
- together, lift the sheet with the body to one side of the bed, making sure it isn't too close to the edge.
- the **person furthest from the body** should place far ankle over near ankle in the direction you want to turn, cross and tuck the arms over their chest in the direction you want to turn, move the pillow in the direction you want to turn, and place your hands on the shoulder and hips furthest away and roll them towards you.
- the **person nearer the body** should pull the draw sheet toward you.

### **Lifting, carrying and transporting**

Discuss any plan for lifting, carrying and transporting the body with all helpers before going ahead. Confirm everyone is clear, have enough people, ensure everyone is able, and clear the route you are taking.

Use a draw sheet to lift the body into the casket, supporting and containing all limbs. Once the body is in the casket, remove the sheet or tuck it under the body. If moving a coffin through a house, do a trial walk through with the empty coffin, to make sure you can get it through doorways and around corners. Having people on the other side of doorways is helpful. Finally, measure the space in the vehicle you are using for transporting the casket, to make sure it will fit.

**Only undertake these steps if you want to, it is a personal choice, this information may be of assistance, but think it all through, talk it out and make the most appropriate decision.**



Natural Death  
Care Centre



The Natural Death Care Centre and Tender Funerals are both not-for-profit organisations based in NSW, committed to informing, educating and empowering individuals, communities, and medical and health professionals. We have a natural, holistic and respectful approach to dying, death, disposal, ceremony and bereavement.

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