

PREPARING THE BODY FOR A HOME FUNERAL OFFERED BY CROSSINGS: CARING FOR OUR OWN

This document is intended for the primary person taking the lead in preparing the body for a wake and his or her helpers.

The two main tasks are, first, to prepare the deceased for the vigil, or the stay at home, and, second, to prepare and care for the room or surrounding space in which the vigil will be held. These instructions assume that the body is at home.

1. DO NOTHING

The first thing to do is to do nothing. Do not feel that now that the last breath has been drawn, that you need to jump up and call someone. You do not need to call anyone. Be still. Be at peace in the silence. Or grieve alone while you can. Nothing needs to be done for an hour or so. If the eyes and mouth are open at this point, this would be a good time to close them.

2. CALL SUPPORT

After an hour has passed, call the attending nurse to come and pronounce the death, and call your support to come and assist with the care of the body. Call someone to pick up dry ice – 40 lbs for an average size adult.

3. MOUTH AND EYES

Swab out the mouth with vinegar, disinfecting mouthwash or mouth swabs. Tie the chin so that the mouth is closed with a scarf or tie, under the chin and around the head. Keep this in place until you are finished with the washing and dressing. Keep gently closing the eyes. If you wish, you could use an eye bag to keep gentle pressure on the eyes until they stay closed. Lubricating with oil also sometimes works for making the lid more flexible so that it stays closed. It also may not be possible to close the eyes all the way; this is usually fine.

4. GET STARTED

Keep in mind that rigor mortis will set in between 2-4 hours after the death. It is easier to wash and dress the body before this occurs, although it is still possible to do so afterwards. A further note: many people do not know that rigor mortis passes after 24-48 hours. The body will return to a limp state. Gently and firmly remove clothes from the body, keeping a sheet over “private” parts. With an absorbent pad under the pelvis, gently push on the bladder so that any liquid that is in the urethra can escape. Throughout this and any other handling of the body, every part of it must be supported, so two or more people are necessary. One person should put on gloves and gently close the vagina and the rectum with cotton balls.

4. WASHING

Have washcloths and towels on hand. Fill one or more basins with warm water, and add a few drops of an aromatic oil, such as lavender. Starting at the head, and using moist (not soaked) cloths, gently and thoroughly wash the body front

and back, working together to turn the body as needed. Remove sheets from the bed, by rolling the body from side to side, and replace them with a clean bottom sheet, or some other clean cloth. Keep in mind that you may never see this sheet again as it will be what you move the body with and put at the bottom of the coffin, so choose accordingly.

5. DRESSING

Dress the deceased in clothes he or she would have wanted, again supporting the entire body as you work. Put the head up on a pillow, and fold the arms over the chest, if possible.

6. DRY ICE

Prepare the dry ice: each piece should be about the size of a brick or two, wrapped in cloth (you must use thick leather or cloth gloves when handling dry ice!). Put one piece in the following places: under the upper back, in the small of the back, and one each at either side of the torso, alongside the body. If the deceased is a large person, you may want more dry ice to ensure adequate cooling. Once the body is ready for the vigil, place a favorite bedspread or other cloths over and around it; the cloths will serve to hide the dry ice from view. The effect should be tranquil, peaceful, and beautiful.

7. ROOM PREPARATION

Look around the room. If it needs sweeping or vacuuming, do so. Remove medical equipment, first aid materials, or clutter and add photos or other beloved items around the place where the body lies. You may add candles, and when doing so, endeavor to keep the light balanced with no macabre shadows on the face or against the wall. You may also add an aromatherapy diffuser. If there is a television in the room, either remove it or cover it with a cloth. Place chairs for visitors. Perhaps you can provide some books or scripture and a lamp near the seating area for those who would like to read during their time with the deceased. The setting should feel right to the family members who are closest to the deceased.

8. ATTITUDE

Throughout this process, be aware that you are providing a valued service to the deceased and to those who are grieving, and allow this feeling of service to permeate your actions.