

The way to go ...

It's a subject that affects everyone and yet one that nobody really wants to discuss. ANGELA BENSTED investigates changing funeral industry trends.



When 81-year-old Cliff said a final goodbye to his wife Mary Patricia (Pat) he planned every aspect of the event himself with meticulous attention to detail.

He sat opposite the funeral director in his front room, trying not to look at Pat's dusty piano and photos of their eight children, leafing slowly through a coffin brochure.

He agonised over the timbers, the handles and the linings as he struggled to respect his graceful wife without being "too flashy".

A deeply religious man, Cliff then spent hours tinkering with the service

booklet, determined that every prayer, every hymn, be the perfect ode to his "beloved".

Fast forward four years to Brisbane's Holy Spirit Northside Hospital where Cliff's been told he has incurable cancer.

Within hours of absorbing the news, Cliff reminds his assembled family he doesn't want a funeral and his body has been offered to the University of Queensland's Biomedical Sciences School for research.

"There was no doubt about his intentions," Cliff's eldest son Mark, 59, says. "He never had any second thoughts." Cliff had made arrangements for his

body to go to the university years ago, but only a few weeks before his death the service had closed its intake for the year so they couldn't accept it.

With time running out, the family scrambled to contact other universities, eventually finding a place for their father with the QUT Institute of Health and Biomedical Innovation.

The University of Queensland, Griffith University, James Cook University and the Queensland University of Technology all accept bequests of bodies within a certain time of death.

The bodies are used for teaching the

next generation of medical students and scientists, and then later cremated at the university's expense with the ashes generally returned to the family.

"I don't think Dad had a very high opinion of himself. Maybe he thought, almost tongue in cheek, he could do some good when he was dead," Mark says.

And while his mother Pat's funeral had been very traditional with a church service and burial in her family's plot, Mark says his dad wanted none of that.

"He didn't want to be lying in a coffin paraded in front of people in the church," Mark says.

Despite Cliff's aversion to funerals and eulogies, his family honoured him with both when he passed away last November, just days after his diagnosis.

"We felt he should have one and he should have had it in that church where he belonged for the greater part of his life," Mark says.

The importance of the funeral ceremony to the grieving process has become lost in today's fast-paced world according to the Queensland Funeral Directors Association.

President Brett Gow and his colleague Don Burstow, the immediate past president, say there is a significant long-term trend to no-frills disposal rather than ceremony.

"Families are confusing efficiency with effectiveness," Don says.

"People are avoiding ceremony, electing to have funeral directors just transfer a dead family member to crematorium without a funeral.

"People are not gathering. They're not embracing the pain of their loss."

But people shouldn't confuse



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ceremony with tradition. Just like the people they honour, funerals can come in all shapes and sizes, particularly with the move away from religious ceremonies.

Don estimates that nearly 70 per cent of services today are conducted by celebrants whereas, maybe 15 years ago, this figure would have been less than two per cent.

With the increase in celebrants has come an increase in modern music, rather than hymns, and the option of having a funeral in the home.

Many families are finding creative ways to weave things into the service to make it more personal.



Brett Gow, President Queensland Funeral Directors Association

“The importance of the funeral ceremony in the grieving process has become lost in today’s fast-paced world”

The family of one motor racing identity wanted his hearse adorned with his racing numbers and his name on the doors and the windscreen.

“It looked magic, like a hearse on the grid at Bathurst,” Don says, prompting Brett to suggest it was the quickest time he’d ever made the trip to the cemetery.

Don says there are no limits on a funeral ceremony.

“If it’s legal we can make it happen for families.”

As people take more interest in the style of their send-off, they’re also asking questions about how their body is laid to rest.

Some would rather plant a tree than have a headstone to mark their passing and green burials are gaining popularity as people consider their carbon footprint, even in death.

Traditional burial may involve embalming with chemicals which can be harmful to the ecosystem, cremation consumes a lot of electricity or natural gas, and the upkeep of a lawn cemetery involves constant mowing.

Crystal Waters eco-community in the Sunshine Coast hinterland has its own green burials cemetery and the Alberton cemetery on the Gold Coast has a natural burial section where there are no grave markers, just a simple sculpture at the entrance where families can place a plaque.

But otherwise, there are limited options for green burials in southeast Queensland according to Esther Swanborough from Swanborough Funerals.

“So far there hasn’t been the demand,” she says, adding “most people will choose a funeral that is in between.”

“The lacquers and the finishes (in traditional coffins and caskets) are not environmentally friendly,” Esther says.

So people conscious of environmental impact are choosing caskets made from



Holy Spirit Northside Hospital Mission Executive Mary Dalmau in the hospital’s mortuary viewing area.

willow or plantation pine rather than old-growth hardwood or glue-filled particle board.

Funeral directors also regularly work with families from non-western backgrounds to observe cultural traditions while still abiding by local laws.

In the Hindu tradition bodies are burnt on an open pyre, a practice local authorities here are unlikely to embrace. “But we have been asked,” Brett says.

Instead, he arranges services at the front of the cremator where the family can push the coffin in.

Don adds a Hindu family will be much more hands-on in the care of the deceased, washing and drying the body and then anointing it with oils and powder, before dressing it themselves and placing it in the coffin.

While Cliff’s “non-funeral” as the family called it last year, had all the hallmarks of the traditional Catholic ceremony, there was no coffin.

But Mark says this didn’t affect his

ability to grieve his father. He wasn’t with his dad when he died but arrived at the hospital soon after to sit with him.

“Having been through that, not having a body at the funeral made no difference,” he says.

When a person dies in hospital, there’s a window of about three hours for family members to sit with the body, according to Holy Spirit Northside Hospital’s Mission Executive, Mary Dalmau.

Outside that time, a visit to the hospital mortuary is generally available, which Mary says can help with grieving.

“There is a sense that viewing the body is a good thing. It gives completeness,” she says.

“Some people say they want to remember their loved one (a certain way, but (viewing the body) is a reverencing of life.”

With 36 years experience as a funeral director, Don Burstow agrees, noting the

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current trend away from open casket funerals. He says most people coming to an open casket service say they feel confronted by it.

"But death is confronting," he says.

Society is generally healthier and living longer so our experience attending and organising funerals is being delayed.

Don's family business records reveal that, 100 years ago, by the time someone reached 15 they'd probably faced four or five significant losses.

Don recently directed an open casket funeral where an older woman burying

her husband brought her young grandchildren to the side of the coffin.

In front of a chapel full of people, she explained what had happened to their grandfather, telling them it was ok to be really sad that he had died and not to be frightened.

"She gave this wonderful piece of teaching not just to her grandchildren but hopefully to the others in the chapel as well," Don says.

Decisions on viewing a body are intensely personal and each family member must make their own decision.

For some families, a personalised funeral is not an option, as even the simplest solution might be unaffordable.

The Queensland Funeral Directors Association puts funeral costs at between \$4000 and \$12,000, with cremations cheaper than burial, particularly if a new grave needs to be purchased.

Families who can't afford this can apply to the Coroner's Court for assistance.

The Government chooses the location and there can be no grave markings.

In 2016 there were 159 so-called pauper's funerals in the South Queensland region (Brisbane and surrounding areas) and 55 in the Sunshine Coast region, the majority cremations in both regions.

It's been nearly six months since Mark's dad died and while he's relieved the family could honour Cliff's desire to donate his body to medical research, the lack of a physical memorial bothers him.

"Apart from records in a government building, there's no permanent record of him having lived and died.

"There's got to be something permanent, some sort of recognition," Mark says.

But as for ignoring Cliff's request for no funeral, Mark says the family has no regrets.

"Funerals aren't just about the person who has died. If anything, it's about the rest of the community," he says.

"The funeral is for the family and others to say goodbye."

WHAT TO DO *when someone dies*

Death is a fact of life, but it's something we don't like to think about - until we lose someone close to us.

Here are some of the decisions that to be made, your rights and obligations:

A post mortem will automatically be scheduled if the deceased has not visited a doctor within three months.

For family, this can be a traumatic experience. It can also cause unwanted delays. To avoid such a situation, it is important, especially for the elderly and those with health concerns, to visit a doctor for a check-up quarterly.

Ambulance officers do not remove the deceased. Call the police rather than the ambulance service in the event of an unexpected death at home, or if you are in doubt.

If no doctor is available, and the body must be taken to the nearest State hospital mortuary by the Government contracted funeral director, this is done at no cost to you and no fee is due.

You may wish to contact a minister or priest. It is not necessary at this time to discuss arrangements, but you may wish to seek spiritual guidance.

If a death occurs at home and the deceased has been under the care of a doctor, then call your doctor. If not, or you are unsure or concerned, call the police and they will contact the doctor.

If for any reason a doctor is unavailable, the police will arrange for the body to be taken to the nearest State hospital mortuary. Once a death certificate has been issued, the body will be released into the care of a funeral director of your choice.

If the death occurs in a hospital, when you are ready, the body will be taken to the hospital mortuary. You then have to make arrangements through a funeral director.

Most nursing home residents have already nominated their funeral director. Staff will immediately notify you if you are not already in



attendance. A doctor's certificate is still required and once issued, the body will be released into the care of the funeral director.

Never feel rushed or pressured. You have every right to take the time to sit with the deceased until you are ready for the body to be removed. When you are ready, call the funeral director to make an appointment at the chapel or request an interview at your home.

You are not bound by any pre-existing arrangements. A pre-arrangement is a free service not an obligation. It is an opportunity for an individual to list their wishes for their funeral service.

However things can change as time goes by, and these arrangements are not an order but a guide to take pressure off at a time when it is difficult to think clearly.

You will probably already have discussed if burial or cremation is preferred. For cremation, it is important to also obtain Government forms for permission to cremate before the body is released into the care of the funeral home.



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