

COPFS cultural and religious awareness guidance on death customs and traditions

Faith/Religion

Buddhism

Wherever possible, friends and relatives should be consulted about the appropriate procedure after a death. In the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, it is best to leave a body undisturbed for at least eight hours. In the Theravadin tradition, the body may be handled in a respectful way immediately.

Buddhists will conform with the legal requirements of a post mortem when the need arises.

Buddhists can be either buried or cremated. There is usually no restriction as to who performs these tasks.

Christianity

It is very important for Roman Catholics to be given their last rites.

Christians believe that Jesus will return to earth to rule forever and that the dead will be resurrected to join in his glory. Because of this conviction, in the past most Christians believed that they should be buried and not cremated. Nowadays, however, cremation is acceptable to all Christian denominations.

Sensitivities around post mortem examinations are likely to be individual rather than common to the religion.

Hinduism

Hindus believe that a body without a soul is a carcass that should be returned to nature and so is cremated. A dying person may ask to be placed on the ground during their final breaths so they can be closer to nature. Children under the age of 5 are generally buried.

A Hindu family may want the body at home at some stage before cremation, usually between the funeral parlour and the crematorium.

Post-mortem examinations are considered extremely objectionable and are deeply disrespectful to the dead and the deceased's family and Hindus will be anxious that all organs are returned to the body before cremation. The preference is not to have a post mortem unless required by law.

A Hindu priest must be called to give his blessings to the deceased. He may tie a thread around the neck or wrist of the dead person and this thread should not be removed. The body should not be touched until relatives arrive.

Relatives will wish to wash the body and to clothe it before the funeral rites. It is customary for the eldest son of the deceased to take a leading part in this (however young he may be) including dispatching the coffin at the crematorium.

Islam

Muslims are always buried as they believe in the resurrection of the body after death. Burial should take place as soon as possible after death with a strong emphasis on it being done the same day. Delay in burial can cause families great distress.

The family will want to wash the body as part of the burial rites and Muslims will express their emotion freely in bereavement.

We must be sensitive to the potential religious and cultural concerns around the requirement for a post mortem. Interference with the corpse is deeply resented. Muslim families will do their utmost to avoid a post mortem, if an alternative is available. It may be prudent to involve an elder or the local Imam (Spiritual Leader) at an early stage to explain the circumstances and necessity for any procedure.

For identification purposes prior to post mortem the body should, where possible, have the eyes closed and the limbs straight, with the head turned towards the right shoulder. Whilst a Muslim deceased is within a mortuary, the body should always be kept covered.

Rules concerning separation of the sexes apply to the corpse therefore the same gender as the deceased should be used to deal with the body.

Judaism

Death has its own customs in Judaism. Some Jews will wish to sit with the deceased until burial has taken place, and, where possible, a room where family may be present should be made available.

Jewish funerals are held speedily, usually on the same or following day after death. Ideally no impediments should be put in the way of these arrangements as the formal week of mourning shiva only begins with the burial, and delay can cause anguish for the family.

When there are clear indications for a post-mortem, these should be discussed with the family and their rabbi, but in general these should only be done where legally mandatory or where compelling medical reasons pertain, because of the imperative to bury the body intact.

The expectation is that the body should be buried intact and that no organs will be retained without due reason, information, and prior consent. If it is necessary to retain organs, it will be expected that these are returned to the body, in due course for burial, and not otherwise disposed of.

Invasive post mortems or any delay necessitated by a post mortem examination causes immense distress but can be alleviated to some extent by ensuring the body is treated with absolute respect, this means covering all parts of the body as each stage of the examination proceeds.

During the family mourning period of 7 days, known as shiva, the immediate family will not leave the house except on a Shabbat (Friday night and Saturday) when they will visit the Synagogue for prayer. During this period friends and relatives will visit the bereaved family and morning and evening prayers will be held in the home.

Sikhism

Sikhs view death as a separation of the soul from the body and is considered part of God's will. It is viewed as a metamorphosis. All Sikhs are cremated, not buried, except for children under five years of age.

Sikhs give no objection to autopsies as long as no body hair is removed in the process.

The 5 Ks (Kesh, Kanga, Kara, Kacherra, Kirpan) of a practicing Sikh must not be removed even after death. The five symbols are as follows:

- Kesh – hair remains uncut and beard not shaved or trimmed, the turban must be worn
- Kanga – comb which is quite small and is used to fasten the knot of hair under the turban
- Kirpan – sword or dagger is carried, but often in a symbolic fashion nowadays, for example, a small replica of a dagger (in metal) inlaid in the comb will suffice
- Kacha – shorts specially made which are worn as underclothing
- Kara – steel bracelet of varying styles and sizes which is worn on the wrist.

Hymns are sung in preparation for the cremation of the body. The family read from Guru Granth Sahib Scriptures continuously for 48 hours or in stages, which is completed by the day of the funeral. When a body is laid out in a room, the light must remain on until the body is removed. The family washes the body and dresses it in new clothes before it is taken for cremation which is the accepted form of disposal of the body.

It is cultural practice that the family of the deceased will clean and clear a room of furniture in the house and put white sheets on the floor, in anticipation of visitors coming to pay their respects.

CULTURAL/ETHNIC AFFILIATIONS

African/African Caribbean

Customs relating to death vary according to religious beliefs and traditions.

Arab

Arabs commonly follow Christian and Islamic death customs, according to their religion.

Bangladeshis

Bangladeshis mostly follow Islamic death customs.

Chinese

Funeral and mourning customs vary very widely in the Chinese tradition, making it very difficult to generalise.

It is important to Chinese people that they bury the deceased as soon as possible because they believe that a body left above the ground allows its spirit to interfere with the living. In the event of a child it would not be the parent's choice to identify the body prior to a post mortem. Arrangements, where possible, should be made for a close family member to carry this out. Muslim Chinese are most likely to object to post mortems.

The vast majority of the Chinese population respect both the legal and medical professions.

Congolese

There are no particular issues of concern in relation to death customs.

Kosovars

The majority of Kosovars are Muslim, although may not be strict. The older generations tend to be more orthodox.

There are no particular issues in relation to death customs, however these may be dictated by Muslim beliefs.

Pakistani

Pakistanis generally follow Islamic death customs.

Polish

Religion in Poland has changed throughout centuries of history. Currently most Poles adhere to the Christian faith; more than 90% are Roman Catholic. The rest of the population consists mainly of Eastern Orthodox, Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant.

There are no particular issues in relation to death customs although it is very important for Roman Catholics to be given their last rites,

Scottish Travelling Community (includes customs of other travelling communities)

When dealing with sudden death, there are no anticipated problem areas arising from any requirement for a post-mortem.

In most Traveller communities, burial, rather than cremation is the preferred option. The funeral and procession is seen as a celebration of the deceased's life. It is not uncommon for a site to be vacated after a death and on occasions for the van of the deceased to be burned.

Somalis

Somalis generally follow Islamic death customs.

Turkish

Most Turks follow Islamic death customs.