

Dead Bodies and Disease: The “Danger” That Doesn’t Exist

Source: The Funeral Consumers Alliance

Funeral industry members frequently claim that dead bodies are a source of contagion to the public, and that embalming is necessary to prevent the spread of disease. Some will also claim that unembalmed dead bodies must be buried in a casket and a vault to prevent “contamination” of groundwater. These assertions are not true. The myth of contagion from dead bodies is one of the most persistent of the American funeral industry, and it's important for journalists to know there is no evidence, peer-reviewed or otherwise, to justify it. In fact, there is overwhelming scientific evidence against it. This guide should help you separate funeral myth from fact.

It's important to remember that this is not a matter of opinion, but of facts. "He said, she said" stories are not appropriate. We often see articles that read like this: "John Q. funeral director says embalming helps prevent the spread of disease, but consumer advocates say this isn't so."

This is not an accurate way to present the issue. It's not just that consumer advocates “say it isn't so”; the Centers for Disease Control, the World Health Organization, and the Pan-American Health Organization have all published data backing up our position. By contrast, there are no studies showing a public health threat from unembalmed bodies. There is no evidence of rampant disease in the countries around the world (almost all of them) where embalming is seldom, if ever, practiced. In addition, we've never seen one instance where a funeral industry member provided a journalist with any evidence to support the claim that unembalmed corpses pose a health threat. Funeral Consumers Alliance, however, supports its position with scientific, peer-reviewed evidence. The next time a funeral industry member claims dead bodies are dangerous, ask for evidence and documentation.

Q&As

Q: Isn't embalming required by law?

A: Never routinely. No state requires embalming for public viewing, though New Hampshire requires a body to be embalmed after 24 hours of being “exposed to the public,” which is misguided. No other state has such requirements. About half the states don't require embalming under any circumstances, while others require embalming or refrigeration if the body isn't buried with 24-48 hours. Source: Final Rights: Reclaiming the American Way of Death.

Q: Aren't dead bodies full of dangerous bacteria that can make the living sick?

A: No, not usually. It's important to know the difference between disease-causing microorganisms and the normal (if unpleasant) microorganisms that produce natural decay. To put it plainly, decomposition is a smell problem, not a health problem. Here's a paragraph the

journal Perspectives in Health (published by the Pan-American Health Organization) that sums it up well:

“The microorganisms that are involved in decomposition are not the kind that cause disease, [Oliver] Morgan's article explains. And most viruses and bacteria that do cause disease cannot survive more than a few hours in a dead body. An apparent exception is the human immunodeficiency virus, HIV, which has been shown to live up to 16 days in a corpse under refrigeration.” Source: Perspectives in Health, a publication of the PAHO, a division of the World Health Organization. Read it here: www.paho.org/english/dd/pin/Number21_article01.htm

Q: But if HIV can live in the body after death, doesn't that make an unembalmed body dangerous?

A: No. A dead person with HIV (or most other diseases) is no more dangerous to you than a living person with HIV. The same simple precautions that we use when coming into contact with bodily fluids from the living apply when handling the dead:

“There is no reason that an unembalmed dead human body should be infectious to anyone attending visitation or public services. Persons transporting and handling bodies or cutting into them may be vulnerable in rare instances, with little or no risk if proper precautions are taken. To refuse to present a body unembalmed because of public health risk is unfounded. On rare occasions of certain deaths resulting from contagious disease, our office may encourage placing a facemask on the decedent before and during transportation and containment, and disposing without embalming or viewing. In the event, however, it becomes necessary to hold a body for an extended period of time before public services can be held, arterial embalming is recommended. Riding on an airplane or a bus may be a public health risk; the presence of an unembalmed body is not.” Source: Dr. Lakshmanan Sathyavagiswaran, M.D., Chief Medical Examiner of Los Angeles, as quoted in Mortuary Management magazine, October, 2006. Article available by email from josh@funerals.org

It surprises many people to learn the U.S. and Canada are the only countries that routinely embalm their dead. Some members of religious and ethnic groups (Jews and Muslims, most prominently, but also some Amish communities and others) in this country stick to the traditional private care of the body by nonprofessionals. The British equivalent of the Centers for Disease Control wrote there's no reason to interfere in these time-honored traditions:

“Some ethnic groups require that relatives and religious leaders carry out their own hygienic preparation and rituals. . . It seems unreasonable to restrict such activities unless an obvious hazard exists. The use of gloves and simple protective clothing by the funeral director's staff and anyone else who handles the bodies should be an acceptable and effective safety measure.” Source: Communicable Disease Report, a publication of the Public Health Laboratory Service in Britain. Available at www.hpa.org.uk/CDR/archives/CDRreview/1995/cdr0595.pdf

The US Centers for Disease Control has also stated: “We have not at any point prescribed embalming as a method of protecting public health.” Source: Bernadette Burden, spokeswoman for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) - Atlanta, Georgia, as quoted in Mortuary Management magazine, October, 2006.

Q: But don't dead bodies cause epidemics? What about all those reports of epidemics after earthquakes and tsunamis?

A: No. This is a myth that just won't die, and the hysteria surrounding dead bodies makes reasonable people make unjustified decisions after natural disasters that distract them from real health concerns:

“The notion that dead bodies pose an urgent health threat in the aftermath of a disaster is one of several enduring myths about disasters and relief efforts that the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have been trying to counter for nearly two decades. In 1986, PAHO produced a video titled "Myths and Realities of Natural Disasters" that debunked some of the most common misconceptions and explained how they exacerbate problems following a disaster. Yet 19 years later, many of these myths persist. Perhaps the most enduring and consequential of these myths is the idea that dead bodies cause epidemics.

“Survivors are much more likely to be a source of disease outbreaks,” says Jean-Luc Poncelet, chief of PAHO's Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief program.” Source: Perspectives in Health, Volume 10, no. 1, 2005, a publication of the PAHO. Available at: www.paho.org/english/dd/pin/Number21_article01.htm

Q: What about groundwater? Don't decomposing corpses contaminate?

A: Not if the cemetery is properly situated away from an important aquifer. Decomposition is nature's way of recycling the body's elements, and we need to keep this in perspective. Humans are not different in death from other animals. Deer, raccoons, and livestock die in the open all the time. None of them are embalmed or placed in caskets or concrete vaults, yet we don't lobby our city councils for mandatory taxidermy for wild animals or livestock. No municipal authorities rush to clean up roadkill (although we might wish them to, for aesthetic reasons) to “prevent the spread of disease.” Note also that no state law requires the use of a casket or a vault for burial. If leakage from buried bodies were a public health concern, we'd expect at least one state would have laws requiring some sort of containment of corpses underground, yet there are no such laws.

While it wouldn't be wise to bury bodies very near a stream or water table, the natural microorganisms in the soil do a good job of breaking down and filtering the products of decomposition:

“Although there is some evidence of microbiological contamination in the immediate vicinity of cemeteries, the rapid attenuation of these microorganisms suggests that they pose little risk.”

Source: “Infectious disease risks from dead bodies following natural disasters.” Rev Panam Salud Publica. 2004, Volume 15, no. 5. A publication of the PAHO. Available at: http://journal.paho.org/index.php?a_ID=441

Q: Don't caskets and vaults prevent leakage from dead bodies?

A: First, see above to understand why leakage usually doesn't matter anyway. But no, caskets and vaults are notorious for cracking and allowing air, water, and other fluids to get in and out. Any honest cemetery worker will tell you there's no way to know what condition the casket and vault will be in if the body must be exhumed, and that it's common to have to drain gallons of water from a supposedly "sealed" casket.

A 1994 study by the Monument Builders of North America on how well or poorly caskets held up over time confirms the anecdotes cemetery workers have relayed to us. They found significant problems with caskets even in mausoleums, an environment presumably "gentler" to the casket than underground burial:

"MBNA found that the Catholic Cemetery Association was documenting an 86% failure rate or problems with wood and cloth-covered caskets, 62% for nonsealing metal, and 46% for 'protective' or 'sealer' caskets. Even with the somewhat better results, the report states in bold print, 'It is highly unlikely that such protective sealer metal caskets employ sufficient mechanisms to contain body fluids or gases.'" Source: Funeral Ethics Organization Newsletter, Spring/Summer 2006. Available at www.funeralethics.org/SpringSummer06.pdf