



Opinion

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Funeral directing in times of crisis

The word 'unprecedented' has been used continuously by the media and others, regarding the change everyone has experienced in respect of all aspects of life since the coronavirus arrived on these shores.

But the word equally applies to matters of mortality and funeral service. Literally overnight we have seen changes to the registration system and cremation certification, the opening of temporary mortuaries, restrictions on numbers attending funerals, together with the withdrawal of limousines, flowers and orders of service. In effect, the service provision has become little more than the transference and care of the deceased, providing a coffin, arranging recorded music and an officiant, forwarding certification and supplying a hearse going direct to the cemetery or crematorium where the first time that we meet the family is immediately prior to the service. This is 'unprecedented' and at polar position from funerals in February 2020.

Funeral directors have been included in the 'deceased management' category of the Government's list of key workers, along with others involved in any disposal-related activity. Although it brings the benefit of childcare arrangements and PPE supplies, for most it means little apart from being able to provide an acceptable explanation about why we are not staying or working from home if ever questioned by the police.

Yet funeral directors' work with the bereaved has simply continued. And, of course, it's not only for families whose relations have died from COVID-19, but those dying from

natural causes along with sudden and unexplained deaths. Whilst funeral directing premises may not be open for clients to visit, the phone and email are answered, and funeral instructions are still received.

Funeral directors have had to suddenly adapt, just as they have in the past, to provide a continuous but amended level of service.

During WWII, those dying from aerial bombardments, which often caused multiple casualties, needed prompt burial or, in fewer cases, cremation. The sudden need for a large number of coffins, which then had to be transported to a cemetery where a trench grave had been prepared - such as in Coventry in 1940 - showed the ability of funeral directors and cemetery staff to meet an immediate need. Just as the Coronavirus Act 2020 simplified cremation certification, so too were amendments to legislation to permit the cremation of wartime civilian casualties on receipt of a Town Clerk's Certificate. Furthermore, the rationing of petrol, tyres and wood necessitated the funeral director to adapt to ensure funerals went ahead during the long, hard years of conflict.

And so today, the requirement to ensure the bereaved are seamlessly served amidst the many restrictions imposed by crematoria and cemeteries has resulted in carefully worded

conversations so clients understand the limitations. Some of these conditions of service do, however, make one question the decision-making rationale.

Funeral directors are exposed to deceased that have, or are suspected to have, died from COVID-19 when carrying out a transfer and encoffining, albeit with PPE being worn. They then travel next to the coffin in the hearse before shouldering the coffin into the crematorium chapel or lowering it into the grave. Yet, for reasons that tend to be attributed to 'the safety of our staff', some crematoria have stopped families from placing flowers on coffins, insist that the curtains must close at the end of each service, that a coffin must be lowered before mourners gather around the grave and demand £150 to disinfect putlocks after every burial. Some even bury the rope (which has replaced conventional webbing) used to lower the coffin.

But are some of these draconian conditions really thought through? What exactly is the risk of placing flowers on the coffin, and to whom? Why disinfect putlocks when the deceased is sealed inside a body bag (and, in some cases, two) and insist on this even if death was not due to COVID-19?

Quite the worst is some crematoria opting to become a disposal-only facility where no mourners can

attend the ceremony. Where that has happened, further pressure has been placed on other crematoria that welcome mourners. Where is the sense of public duty and service? The decision to forbid mourners is utterly shameful and has rightly been castigated in the media. As the Prime Minister said on 23 March: "And we'll stop all social events, including weddings, baptisms and all social events, but excluding funerals."

Indeed, in a letter to council leaders on 17 April, Local Government Minister Simon Clarke reiterated the Government's support for funeral attendance, saying: "It is important

that mourners still have the choice to attend the funeral of their loved ones."

Whilst the short-notice transition from providing a full to a limited service has led, in some cases, to confrontational dialogue with clients who found themselves literally being short changed, funeral directors soon worked out what could be provided within the narrow frameworks imposed by third parties, whilst also taking into account the well-being of their own staff.

But clients need to know any limitations before they arrange a funeral. The

embarrassing claim of "You never told us we couldn't do this or that" needs to be avoided. Expectations must be managed through an explicit statement of what can or cannot be provided by the funeral director, along with a summary of the restrictions at a cemetery or crematorium. A hard copy or email with these terms must be provided to ensure misunderstandings are avoided or, at the least, minimised, and clients need to sign this by way of acknowledgement. It's also essential for funeral directors to review their usual terms and conditions in case these conflict with any amended or withdrawn services.

Whilst clients genuinely appreciate what funeral directors do for them, there's no getting away from the fact that we provide a service that nobody really wants and often resent paying for. Funeral directors are often portrayed in the media as being comical or corrupt. We are also taking away something they love. As one commentator remarked: "The funeral director is held responsible for death as a meteorologist is half-jokingly blamed for the weather."

At a time when we really want to do more for our clients, who really need more from us, our service is constrained. There's little we can do about this except support families as best we can. And, as colleagues involved in the 'deceased management', it is up to us all to work together and appreciate the difficulties we all face at this unprecedented time.



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