



Tim Collison

Closing The Lid on our Future

by Tim Collison, CFSP

Over the past few years, I've seen an alarming trend among funeral service professionals. Many simply throw up their hands in the air when they've encountered a remains which is difficult to embalm or cosmetize. There have been many times during a discussion of treating difficult cases when I've heard statements such as, "I told them it would be better if the casket were closed," or, "I would have closed the lid on that one." When discussing such matters among groups of funeral directors at various meetings and conventions, the concept of becoming more skilled at the technical aspects of our profession does not seem to have much importance.

At some of the conventions I attend or discussion groups in which I participate, there is definitely no priority placed on embalming and restorative arts. The majority of subjects which are addressed at these gatherings consist of things like pre-need, the rising rate of cremation, merchandising (caskets, vaults, and urns), funeral service corporations, etc. In my view, only one recent development in funeral service has served to bring a small amount of attention back to the area of the preparation room, and that is the involvement of OSHA. It is my goal in this article to illustrate why it is imperative that we re-focus ourselves on the "back room."

If we examine the rationalizations which are used by some embalmers to minimize the importance of technical issues in our profession, one does have to admit a degree of validity to some of the points which are raised. The demands on our time are increas-

ing constantly, particularly in funeral homes with limited personnel. After completing two hours of arrangements, the service club luncheon, the 1:30 p.m. pre-need appointment, and the filling out of four different documents pertaining to the latest call, the last thing we need is to deal with three hours of restorative work prior to dressing and casketing the body. It is not an uncommon problem that our families see too little of us, which contributes greatly to the stress involved in our profession. It's not surprising then that there is a tendency to look for shortcuts or ways to utilize our time more efficiently to accomplish all of the necessary requirements to serve the family of the deceased—including the performing of lengthy technical procedures. When this leads us to minimize the time spent preparing the remains, however, the situation has become one of "the tail wagging the dog."

If we have not attempted to present the remains in the best possible condition, we have forgotten why traditional funeral service exists in our society. The preservation and restoration of the dead human body is the foundation for our profession. While funeral service has become much more diversified in the past twenty-five years, I have never heard it argued convincingly that the viewing of the body by survivors—the visual perception of death—is not the most important aspect of our service to the public. It is also the unique skill factor which absolutely separates funeral service professionals from anyone with a cot and a station wagon. When the

preparation of the body becomes subordinate to other business concerns, we have lost an important part of our identity.

To the extent that one can predict where funeral service will be in the future, it seems reasonable to assume that difficult cases will become a more predominant percentage of the bodies we receive in our establishments. We know that the number of accident victims and the number of organ and tissue donors are increasing, for example. The funeral director-embalmer can be assured that he will be called upon to embalm, restore, and present bodies which require additional time and effort.

A few years ago, while doing research for another project, I requested information from the Bureau of Vital Statistics regarding the correlation of cremation as a method of final disposition to the age of the deceased. At the same time, I obtained information on correlations between cremation and certain causes of death. The results which I received were what I had expected. The cremation percentage was the lowest when the age of the deceased was between 1 and 18 years. When looking at the cause of death, the lowest cremation percentage occurred when the cause of death was accidental or by homicide. This finding shouldn't surprise any of us. We have known for years that when death is sudden and the family has not been prepared for its occurrence, there is a greater psychological need for viewing the remains. The separation is so sudden

Please turn to page 23

CLOSING THE LID

continued from page 9

that there is a need by the family for concrete proof or visual verification, in order to accept the death. But while these are the bodies that our families need to see most, they are also the types of cases that are most difficult to prepare for viewing. For years I have referred to this as Murphy's law of funeral service: "The worse the case, the more the family will want viewing."

The cause of death influences the cremation percentage in at least two ways. First, our statistics tell us that the lower cremation percentages occur when accident or homicide is listed as the cause of death. Secondly, these two categories are also the major cause of death for individuals in the 1 to 18 year old age group. And individuals in this age group have the lowest cremation percentage, as we've seen. Consequently, the family will desire to view the body for reasons of age as well as sudden death. This brings me to another factor which will influence the increase of difficult cases which families will wish to view.

If we examine the criteria used for donor bodies, we find that younger tissue is most desired by tissue banks because it can be most effectively utilized. How many times have we been informed that a young person who has been involved in an automobile accident will be an organ or tissue donor? It is even more common that a person who has been sustained on life support after a serious accident will be a live organ donor, as well as a donor of other tissues such as skin and bone. This situation is going to become more common. With hospitals routinely asking families for permission to retrieve tissue, as well as the ongoing media campaign, funeral service will be encountering an increasing number of young donor cases.

This leads us to a fact of life in funeral service which we have probably been aware of, although we may not have understood its origin. Technically

demanding remains which families desire to view are becoming a larger percentage of traditional services. This can be seen as an inconvenience, but it can also be viewed as an opportunity. For many years now, the tide of media attention and the public attitude has been negative with regard to funeral service. We have searched for ways to show the value of what we do and champion our chosen careers without appearing to be self-serving. Seemingly at every turn, funeral service has been criticized and portrayed as preying on the emotions of those devastated by the loss of a loved one.

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This characterization has been so successfully presented that the thinking that gave birth to American traditional funeral service has been forgotten. Critics would have the public believe that a group of heinous individuals saw a tremendous opportunity in death, and created an industry by brainwashing the public into seeing value in viewing a dead human remains. The idea that family and friends might wish to pay their respects one last time and the concept that funeral directors facilitate this desire are never presented. The question which we might pose to rebut our critics' statements is this: "Why do survivors feel such a compelling need to view the remains of someone who has died suddenly?"

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One of the most significant events in funeral service history was the demand created for embalming by

families desiring to see soldiers killed on the battlefields during the Civil War. To this day, there are families who wait to hear of confirmation of death from wars over long ago. Our military establishment sees such value in returning soldiers to their families that millions of dollars are spent on the effort. These are a few examples of the public showing their need for viewing the deceased.

If funeral service would begin to embrace organ and tissue donation, these sorts of difficult cases could become real opportunities. There have been innumerable times in the last several years when the topic of organ and tissue donation has been mentioned in a negative manner by funeral service professionals. There is no denying that additional time, effort, and resources are needed for the preparation and restoration of these donor bodies. But there is also no question that families—and funeral service—will benefit from the viewing of these bodies, especially if our efforts can restore them to a pleasing countenance.

No one is suggesting that this is easy to do. We are all aware of the problems with leakage when bone donation has occurred. Skin, internal organ, and eye donations all develop their own set of specific difficulties. I have spoken with several tissue banks in the past few years, and they have expressed concern that negative remarks made by funeral directors have actually stopped families from giving permission for tissue retrieval. While I understand the reason behind this activity by funeral directors, we must also realize that these actions are counter-productive. The additional effort which is required in these cases is very real, but I can only imagine the guilt I would feel if I found out I was the reason someone had suffered needlessly due to the lack of transplantable tissue.

I feel we need to encourage embalmers to educate themselves in the technical aspects of preparing donor bodies, so that we can become proponents for and facilitator of organ and tissue donations. What could be a

Please turn to page 26

CLOSING THE LID

continued from page 23

better way of showing the charitable nature which is inherent in funeral service than by sponsoring such a worthy cause? The technical side of funeral service can be as rewarding as the face-to-face work we do. What we must remain aware of is the integral connection between the two. The emotional commitment of the family to the deceased gave birth to our profession. By remembering that this profession of ours began when the sum total of what we had to offer was our technical skills, we can keep our perspective. The integrity of our profession lies in part in our efforts to do our best, whether the job is easy or difficult.

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Obviously, this article has been a departure from my usual ones on cosmetology and restorative art. I have addressed this topic in the hope that the future challenges funeral service will face will prove our unflinching resolve to serve the families who call on us. I'd welcome comments or questions, and I can be contacted by E-mail at dodge4u@wingsbbs.com.

Editorial Apology

We regret to note that an omission was made in the last issue (page 23, end of column 2), which should have read "and thus is entitled to no control over a former spouse's burial. When minor children exist, however, the divorced spouse may acquire. . ."

NEW ZEALAND

continued from page 13

ers furnished by the funeral home. Each member of the family lays a flower, or at least flower petals, on the casket and by so doing they are saying their good-bye's. This happens with burial services as well as cremations. It is a beautiful way to involve the family in a closing ceremony.

Many funeral homes have a lowering catafalque. This device is designed to lower the casket for ceremonial purposes only, until about half is all that is showing. (See photos A and B.) These catafalques are very attractive, often made of marble, and have a lowering device located in the middle. At the appropriate time the person officiating at the service will lead in a time of committal. This person has a control button to activate the catafalque, and the casket is lowered. In this simple ceremony, the family is making the committal of the body back to the earth and having closure for themselves. The pictures show a catafalque in the raised and lowered positions.

Some funeral directors do not like the lowering catafalque idea at all. They think it is a little too theatrical and takes away from the beauty of the service. The ones who feel this way have worked out some other type of closing ceremony that works just as well. One funeral director has the family follow the casket to the hearse, and then say their good-byes as the hearse leaves to drive to the crematorium. Others have the family do their ceremony in private after the crowd has gone to the reception area.

These ceremonies of closure are both meaningful and healthy. Saying good-bye as a hearse drives away may sound painful and even morbid, but it gives a time for facing reality and symbolizes the movement into the grieving process. I think our efforts to protect the family from these sad events can be damaging instead of helpful.

The point is that the funeral direc-

tors have thought through the need for ceremony and have taken the steps necessary to make the ceremonies a part of the funeral. The New Zealand funeral directors have taken a more active role in the design of a funeral than we have here in the states . . . so far. They do not sit back and hope some minister would come up with an idea to make these services better and more meaningful. These funeral directors found the ideas and then made them work.

INSURANCE AGENT

continued from page 15

is the illustrated premium the guaranteed maximum? If it is not, what is the guaranteed maximum?

- What interest or dividend crediting rate is being assumed in the illustration? Is the company currently meeting that rate, and has it been meeting it in prior years? For how many prior years? Based on your assumptions as to the state of the economy, is it reasonable to assume that the insurance company will be able to meet that interest or dividend rate assumption in future years?
- Is the yield assumption credible? If two insurers provide illustrations and one is based on a substantially higher yield assumption than the other, what facts justify the assumption that the company will be more profitable than the other?
- What will be the result if the company is unable to credit the policy with the illustrated yield? If the product is "pure" whole life and the illustration shows that the premium will "vanish" after a specified number of years, the effect of the company's failure to meet the illustrated interest or dividend rate will result in increasing the number of years the premium must be paid before it vanishes. If the product is blended whole life and the illustrated premium is not the guaranteed maximum for the term component, the