



Information Sheet: Family-led Funeral Services

Purpose

This information is intended as a guide only. It provides a general overview of matters relating to funerals conducted in Victoria without the assistance of a professional funeral director.

The Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust recommends individuals carefully consider their circumstances and the information outlined in this information sheet when considering whether or not to undertake a funeral without the assistance of a professional funeral director.

Summary

In Victoria, funerals can be conducted by a family or individual without the assistance of a funeral director. However, certain responsibilities and regulatory requirements must still be adhered to.

Conducting a funeral in accordance with relevant Australian/Victorian laws and regulations includes:

- Collecting and transporting the body of the deceased in an appropriate vehicle
- Storing the body of the deceased
- Placement of the body into an appropriate coffin or casket
- Coordinating all bookings with the

cemetery/crematoria and also, if required, celebrant/clergy, caterers, newspaper (notices), service program, etc

- Ensuring all documentation required by the Department of Health and the relevant cemetery/crematoria is correct, completed and submitted to the appropriate authorities as required
- Registering the death with the Registrar of Births, Deaths, Marriages (Victoria), and any other relevant authorities.

It is important to note that cemeteries/crematoria are unable to fulfil the role of a funeral director or provide assistance to a family or individual in this area. The family or individual undertaking the family-led funeral is ultimately responsible for ensuring all regulatory requirements and those of the relevant cemetery/crematoria are adhered to.

The local cemetery trust can assist in providing important information regarding legal and procedural requirements for families or individuals wishing to conduct a funeral without the assistance of a funeral director.

In addition, the Births, Deaths, Marriages (Victoria) website is a good source of helpful information:

<http://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/>



What is a family-led funeral?

A family-led funeral, sometimes also referred to as a 'simple' funeral, is where a family or individual chooses to conduct a funeral without the assistance of a professional funeral director. It is important to keep in mind that conducting a family-led funeral does not reduce or alter the regulatory requirements or tasks that must be undertaken.

Families may, for financial, religious, cultural, community or other reasons choose to undertake a funeral without the assistance of a funeral director, and/or to care for the deceased at home, prior to cremation or burial.

Prior to a burial or cremation, there are a number of legal requirements which must be fulfilled, whether undertaken by a funeral director or an individual *acting* as a funeral director (in the case of a family-led funeral). It is important that anyone undertaking a family-led funeral understands and complies with these requirements.

What are the basic requirements of a family-led funeral?

Organising and conducting a funeral without the assistance of a funeral director requires the family or individual to undertake a number of responsibilities and tasks that would normally be the responsibility of the funeral director.

These typically relate to administrative tasks, such as registering the death with Births, Deaths, Marriages, and booking the cemetery/cremation. Practical tasks, such as storing and transporting the body are also required and it is important to keep in mind that families and individuals may find this aspect of a family-led funeral very confronting and difficult.

All deaths must be confirmed by a registered medical practitioner, who will issue a **Medical Certificate of**

Cause of Death. In addition, a second, independent doctor must confirm the death and provide a **Certificate of Registered Medical Practitioner Authorising Cremation**.

Death Certificate

Funeral arrangements cannot be undertaken until a **Medical Certificate of Cause of Death** has been issued. If the death occurred as a result of natural causes, a medical practitioner will usually sign and issue this certificate.

In the instance of death as a result of accident or other circumstances, the body will be taken into the custody of the State Coroner, which will undertake an inquiry into the cause of death. In this circumstance, where the funeral is being arranged by an individual or family, they will need to:

- Contact the coronial services centre to find out when the body may be released, together with a Coroner's Order which permits the body to be 'buried, cremated or otherwise disposed of', and
- Arrange in advance appropriate collection, transportation and storage of the body prior to the funeral service/burial/cremation.

Note: In many cases subject to coronial inquiry, the body may undergo an invasive physical medical examination (autopsy). This aspect can be highly confronting and physically demanding.

Cremation

Application for Cremation Authorisation forms can be obtained on the Department of Health website: www.health.vic.gov.au/cemeteries and should be completed by the person making the application for cremation.

In the event of cremation taking place, **a second registered medical practitioner** (i.e. who did not sign the **Medical Certificate of Cause of Death**) must



validate the original death certificate and issue a **Certificate of Registered Medical Practitioner Authorising Cremation** form.

When this form is submitted to the cemetery/crematoria, it must be accompanied by:

- The **Certificate of Registered Medical Practitioner Authorising Cremation**; and either:
- A copy of the **Medical Certificate of Cause of Death** of a person 28 days or older; or
- A copy of the **Medical Certificate of Cause of Perinatal Death** (stillborn - 27 days old)

Note: The **Certificate of Registered Medical Practitioner Authorising Cremation** is not required when the following documents have been provided:

- A **Notice of still-birth***
(However a pathology certificate/letter from the hospital is a requisite. The death of an infant within 28 days of birth requires a **Medical Certificate of Perinatal Death** and confirmation of death from a second, independent doctor.)
- A **Coroner's Certificate** or other documentation, as outlined in **section 47** of the *Coroners Act 2008*.

The State of Victoria defines:

Still-birth as either: the birth of an infant of at least 20 weeks gestation or, if gestation is unknown, an infant weighing at least 400g which shows no signs of life after birth.

Neonatal death: The death of a live born infant, less than 28 days after birth, of at least 20 weeks gestation or, if gestation is unknown, weighing at least 400g.

- In the event of a death being referred to the Coroner, this document will be replaced by an **Order for Relative of Body** form.
- An individual, acting in the role of a funeral director, must register the death with **Births, Deaths, Marriages (Victoria)** and obtain a **Victorian Death Certificate**

- Death certificates can be downloaded from the Births, Deaths, Marriages website:
<http://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/>

A family or individual can make a booking directly with the cemetery or crematoria. In this case, the family must clearly identify that they are acting as the funeral director, and full payment of all service charges will be required prior to any booking being confirmed.

No legal papers are required to care for a deceased person at home or to prepare the body for a funeral service.

Pacemakers / Bio-Mechanical devices

Medical documentation provided at the time of death will indicate whether the deceased body contains any internal bio-mechanical device, such as a Cardiac Pacemaker or Internal Cardiac Defibrillator.

These devices have internal batteries that can explode during the cremation process and **MUST** be deactivated and removed from the body **PRIOR** to cremation.

Note: Non-battery powered devices such as portacaths, shunts, artificial joints, plates or screws are not affected and may remain with the body.

Storage and transport

Prior to undertaking a family-led funeral, consideration should be given to the many health and safety issues associated with the movement and hygienic preparation and storage of the body, prior to the funeral.

In many situations, the body may be kept at home for personal or practical reasons provided that the environment is kept at a cooler temperature.

A body will begin to deteriorate due to the natural process of decomposition and this can occur gradually, over time, or rapidly with little warning. This may cause the body to become offensive or a hazard to the health of those nearby, requiring the movement of the body



from the place of death to a suitable storage facility.

A covered vehicle with cooling facilities is most appropriate for transport (depending on travel time and weather conditions).

Coffin/Casket

There are no regulatory requirements as to the specific construction of a coffin/casket in the State of Victoria, other than it must be 'fit for purpose' and meet the following minimum standards:

- Able to comfortably contain the remains of the deceased
- Be fully enclosed with a sealable lid
- Be impervious to the leakage of any material
- Have a clearly defined nameplate to identify the full name of the deceased person. **Note:** This nameplate **must** match exactly the name on all paperwork.

Coffin design should also (ideally) consider the mechanism in which it can be moved, such as handles.

Cemetery/Crematoria arrangements

Once the relevant documents have been completed and obtained and the coffin has been arranged, the family or individual can contact the cemetery or crematoria to arrange a time for the service and other funeral arrangements.

The individual making the arrangements will need to provide information contained in the **Application for Cremation/Burial Authorisation** and they may be required to provide a copy of this document to the cemetery at the time of making the booking.

At this time, the cemetery staff will discuss and confirm all funeral arrangements, which may include burial/cremation, memorial service details (catering, music, programs, flowers) and any special

requirements. Payment for this service will also be discussed and confirmed, including payment method.

Costs

There are a number of costs associated with a funeral service. These may include: coffin/casket, certificates from medical practitioners, storage and transport, newspaper and other public notices, clergy/celebrant fees etc.

These costs are in addition to costs associated with the actual burial or cremation and memorialisation costs. The cemetery or crematoria staff will advise the family or individual of various costs and options available at the time of booking/confirming arrangements. All cemetery/crematoria costs must be paid in full prior to the funeral service/burial/cremation.

Public notification (newspaper notices)

It is common practise to place a public 'death' notice in the newspaper, advising of the death and funeral arrangements. Different newspapers will charge various fees for the notice. However, this is not compulsory and many people today choose alternative notification methods such as text messages, Facebook or through their personal networks.

Prior to printing the death notice, newspapers may request confirmation of personal details or those of the deceased, including a death certificate.

Arriving at the cemetery or crematoria

The coffin should be taken to the cemetery/crematoria a few minutes prior to the scheduled time, which allows the cemetery/crematoria staff to undertake relevant checks on paperwork.

It is important to ensure that **prior** to arriving at the cemetery all necessary documents are in order. A body will not be accepted by the cemetery or crematoria if the documents are incomplete or information is incorrect.



On arrival, an authorised officer/staff member will check the documentation to ensure it is in order, complete and correct. This will include checking that the name of the deceased is identical in spelling on all documentation and the nameplate on the coffin.

If there are inconsistencies or incomplete or missing documentation, or if there are any problems with the coffin, the cemetery or crematoria has the right to halt the funeral until the problem has been rectified.

The vehicle transporting the coffin will be escorted to the crematoria/chapel by the authorised staff member.

Registration of the death

All deaths must be registered with **Births, Deaths, Marriages (Victoria)**. This takes place following the completion of the funeral and requires specific information relating to the deceased.

Individuals who are organising the disposal of remains rather than a funeral director need to contact the Registry for further information on the death registration process: www.bdm.vic.gov.au

Notification of other authorities

Consider whether other authorities need to be notified. These may include life insurance companies, superannuation, bank/credit union, employer, Department of Veteran Affairs, and Department of Social Services.

For more information:

For more information regarding family-led funerals and relevant legal and other requirements and obligations, contact **The Greater Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust**: (03) 9355 3100 or email enquiries@gmct.com.au www.gmct.com.au or contact **Births, Deaths, Marriages (Victoria)**: www.bdm.vic.gov.au or **The Coroners Court of Victoria**: www.coronerscourt.vic.gov.au



**The Greater Metropolitan
Cemeteries Trust**

Lasting memories, peaceful places.

