



KENT & SUSSEX
CREMATORIUM



ROYAL TUNBRIDGE WELLS

What is Embalming?

Embalming is defined as the preservation of a body from decay, originally with spices and more recently through arterial injection of embalming fluid. Historically, the process is identified with the Egyptians, and the mummification of bodies. In fact, this complicated and extreme method was abandoned, although in recent centuries, ways of preserving bodies has received considerable attention.

Varying levels of success were achieved but probably due to expense, they were utilised by very few people. In the past thirty years, the commercial promotion of embalming has greatly increased. There has also been an increase in the use of unqualified embalmers over this period. Embalming is particularly evident amongst larger commercial funeral directors in urban locations. Conversely, the process is less common in rural areas, where small funeral directing businesses predominate, due in part to a lack of facilities to carry out embalming, with some funeral directors even opposing the process.

The current use of the word "embalming" is misleading. The process is generally referred to as cosmetic embalming. It is used to improve the visual appearance of the body, and to prevent deterioration in the period leading up to the funeral. It has no long-term preservative value and cannot be compared with the Egyptian concept of preserving bodies, and the decision as to the merits of embalming must lie with the individual although a number of issues should be considered:

Environmental Issues

The embalming process involves removing the body fluids and replacing them with a solution of formaldehyde usually containing a pink dye. The body fluids are treated and disposed of via the public sewer. The embalming fluid normally consists of a 2% solution of formaldehyde and approximately one pint of embalming fluid per stone weight of the body, plus one pint is used.

Consequently, one to two gallons of embalming fluid can be used and the effect of this on soil, soil organisms and air quality following burial or cremation needs further independent research.

Our ignorance of the consequences of using this chemical is a cause for concern. In particular, the chemical is used by funeral directors and embalmers who carry no responsibility for its impact on the cemetery, crematorium or community, and in some burial schemes, such as woodland burial, all chemicals may be prohibited.

Is Embalming Necessary?

Anecdotally, there is little support for routine embalming across the medical profession, and no evidence to indicate that a dead body poses a threat to the living, except where death was due to a notifiable disease. No evidence exists of funeral directing, cemetery or crematorium staff obtaining an infection from an un-embalmed body, with embalmers suggesting that the process thoroughly disinfects the body and removes any risk, however slight, to any person coming into contact with the body.



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Kent & Sussex Crematorium incorporating Tunbridge Wells Cemetery



The British Institute of Embalmers comment as follows: "The visual characteristics of a badly damaged body may be improved by additional specialised treatment where time is available. To be effective, it may be necessary to carry out the treatment over more than 24 hours. Effective cosmetic treatment in such cases may also decrease the trauma of a sudden death, and the benefit is almost always acknowledged by the bereaved"

It should be noted that where the person required a high intake of drugs during their terminal illness, their body can deteriorate rapidly unless refrigeration is employed.

Viewing the body

You will need to consider carefully whether you will benefit from viewing the body at the funeral directors premises, if not then there is no logical reason to choose embalming, particularly if you have viewed the body immediately after death and have no wish to repeat this at the funeral directors premises.

You should appreciate that if you wish to view the body, you may be required to pay a fee for using the funeral directors Chapel of Rest (or Repose), and that embalming may also be recommended as a pre-requisite to "viewing", the implication being that an un-embalmed body may cause distress.

The quality of the embalming

The British Institute of Embalmers offers training and certification for members to maintain an identified standard of embalming. Their members may be self-employed and provide a service to funeral directors, or are funeral directors or their staff. It takes a minimum of one hour to correctly embalm a body and the charge for this can be between £25 and £100, inclusive of chemicals.

Do you have a choice?

You should reasonably expect to be informed about the embalming process by your funeral director or person assisting or advising you with the funeral arrangements, and it should only be undertaken where an effective result is judged to be achievable from the process. This decision is important as the process could involve an additional cost of up to £100 on the funeral account.

In a code of ethics issued by the British Institute of Embalmers, it clearly states that "*The client's informed consent, preferably in writing, must be obtained*". Notwithstanding the latter, if you are opposed to embalming then you should expressly forbid it.