

AN OUTLINE OF DIFFERENT CULTURAL BELIEFS AT THE TIME OF DEATH



Living in a society represented by many cultures and religious beliefs means that memorable events can be celebrated differently. This document looks at the different religious beliefs surrounding death and dying and what funeral or burial rituals may be undertaken. The material has been sourced from several locations, predominantly from the New Zealand website of "A Memory Tree"¹ and the Multicultural Palliative Care Guidelines (PCA, 1999)².

This document is provided as a brief resource which may assist healthcare workers to understand the different cultural or religious approaches to death and dying. **It should not be seen as prescriptive or fully detailing all the intricacies of a given religion or culture, nor is intended to be a definitive statement indicating how individuals may wish to be treated during or after their death.** The final authority on all of a dying person's needs must come from the person themselves, with some guidance or input from their family. These are the people who can best advise a healthcare worker as to their needs or requests at this stage in their life.

There are a number of religions that cross language and cultural boundaries. It is important when working with a person facing a life-threatening illness and their family to understand where religion fits within the spectrum. There are many for whom religion in the context of their life in Australia does not have as significant a role as it may have in their homeland. However, when faced with a life-threatening illness and the possible or subsequent death of a family member or friend, religious practices, rituals and beliefs may resume an important place. We must not make assumptions about people on the basis of their language. In addition, we must not assume that all people within a particular religion practice the same rituals, have the same beliefs, or the same language. As with many other things that make us individual, there are many choices and many paths followed. There are many books written on religion and its practices and rituals in today's society^{4,5,6,7,8}. These cover aspects of death and dying to a far greater extent than is possible in this document.

Whilst every effort has been made to provide accurate information and resources, the author is aware that there are often many differences in interpretation and understanding within a given culture. **This resource is intended as a general guide only.**

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BUDDHIST

BELIEFS

Buddhists believe in rebirth and that when they die they will be reborn again. The goal is to escape the cycle of death and rebirth and attain nirvana or a state of perfect peace. There are lots of different types of Buddhism and many different ways of dealing with death.

PREPARING

The dying person may ask a monk or nun in their particular Buddhist tradition to help them make the transition from life to death as peaceful as possible. Buddhists believe that a person's state of mind as they die is very important so they can find a happy state of rebirth when they pass away. Before and at the moment of death and for a period after death, the monk, nun or spiritual friends may chant from the Buddhist scriptures.

AT THE TIME

Buddhists believe the spirit leaves the body immediately but may linger in an in between state near the body. In this case it is important the body is treated with respect so that the spirit can continue its journey to a happy state. The time it is believed to take for the spirit to be reborn can vary depending on the type of Buddhism practised.

FUNERAL

Because there are so many different types of Buddhist funeral traditions vary. Funerals will usually consist of a simple service held at the crematorium chapel. The coffin may be surrounded by objects significant to the person who has died. Monks may come with the family to the funeral and scriptures may be chanted.

BURIAL

The person may either be cremated or buried depending on their tradition. There may be speeches and chants on the impermanence of life.

AFTER

The grave may be visited by friends and family in remembrance of the person who has passed away. The importance of the gravesite will depend on the particular Buddhist tradition. Buddhists believe that it is just the physical body that lies in the grave because the person's spirit has been reborn. Buddhists will often do things to wish for the happiness of the deceased person. For example in Southeast Asia lay people give offerings to the monks in memory of the dead person.

CATHOLIC

BELIEFS

Catholics believe that there is an afterlife and that once a person dies they will see God face to face. If a person has committed a grave offence and has not repented at the time of death then that person would not enter into the full glory of heaven.

PREPARING

The sick and the elderly can receive the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick on a regular basis if they wish to. If they can't get to church on their own they will be taken there by other members of the church.

AT THE TIME

When a person is close to death the family or friends ask a priest to come and pray with the sick person and the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is administered. This includes anointing with Holy Oils and the reception of the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion. After the person has passed away the priest comforts the family and helps them prepare the funeral arrangements.

FUNERAL

The Catholic funeral rite is called the Order of Christian Funerals. Family and friends pray for the soul of the deceased person and ask God to receive their soul into his eternal glory. The Vigil of the Deceased (a prayer service) is held the night before the funeral. On the day of the funeral a Requiem Mass for the deceased person is celebrated. This includes scripture, prayers and hymns. Family and friends are invited to take part in the service.

BURIAL

At the grave or place where the body has been entombed the Rite of Committal is celebrated. Family members and friends along with the priest pray once again for the deceased person as they commit the body or cremated remains to the final resting-place. The gravesite is also blessed.

AFTER

Over the next year family members and friends often have Mass celebrated for the peace of the soul of the deceased person. On special occasions such as the deceased's birthday, Christmas or anniversary of the death, family and friends will often visit the grave. Flowers or other objects to remember the deceased are sometimes placed on the grave as a sign of respect.

CHRISTIAN

BELIEFS

Christians trust they will go to heaven to be with God once they have died and so in some respects a funeral is a time of joy, although also sadness, as the person will be missed by friends and loved ones.

PREPARING

The church minister may come and visit the person and their family to discuss any concerns and to help the person to prepare for their death. Depending on the form of Christianity (i.e. Anglican, Presbyterian etc.) and the particular church, there may be slightly different customs that will be followed.

AT THE TIME

The church minister will offer any comfort or assistance the family needs to help them cope with the death and to organise the funeral. Friends will often send their sympathies in the form of cards and/or flowers to the deceased's family.

FUNERAL

A Christian may be either buried or cremated, depending on their preference. The ceremony will typically be held at the deceased person's church and conducted by the minister, but it could also be held at a funeral home. The ceremony may involve hymns, readings and prayer by both the minister and the deceased's family and friends. The casket may be present in the room during the ceremony and carried out at the end by pallbearers – usually members of the deceased's immediate family. There is often the opportunity for people to view the deceased and to say their last goodbyes before the deceased is buried.

BURIAL

If the deceased has been cremated the ashes may be scattered. Otherwise, the ashes or body will be buried in a cemetery and marked with a gravestone to remember the deceased.

AFTER

On special occasions such as the deceased's birthday, Christmas or anniversary of the death, family and friends may come and visit the grave. Often, flowers or other objects to remember the deceased will be placed on the grave as a sign of respect.

CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (MORMON)

BELIEFS

Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints (or Mormons as they are also known) believe that at death the body and the spirit separate. The spirit goes to the spirit world before being reunited with the body. The judgment will then occur and after that the person will live in Heaven with God.

PREPARING

The ward bishop and members of the church will offer support to the person who is dying and their family.

AT THE TIME

The ward bishop will go to the deceased's home and offer assistance to the family in making arrangements for the funeral.

FUNERAL

Funeral services are generally conducted by the bishop in a ward chapel or in a mortuary. Although people mourn the loss of a loved one, the funeral service is viewed as a celebration of the life of the deceased. The service will consist of a eulogy, doctrinal messages, music and prayer. The funeral is designed to bring peace and solace, as church members believe families may be reunited in the life hereafter. Mourners often send flowers to the family to show their support.

BURIAL

Church members who have received temple ordinances are buried in their temple clothing. The grave is dedicated as a place of peace and remembrance for the family. Cremation is generally discouraged.

AFTER

The gravesite is considered to be a sacred place for the family to visit and place floral remembrances.

GREEK ORTHODOX

BELIEFS

Followers of the Greek Orthodox religion believe in eternal life. Thus the church strongly emphasises a positive outcome in death — that the deceased is alive with God. While death is the separation of the soul (the spiritual dimension of each person) from the body (the physical dimension), the physical body will be reunited with the soul at the Last Judgment.

PREPARING

The Orthodox religion is practiced today much as it was practiced hundreds of years ago, and is highly ritualistic and symbolic. The coffin is taken home on the way to the funeral service, so that the deceased can visit their home for the last time. Wailing usually takes place at the home. If an Orthodox priest is unavailable to administer the last anointing, it is sometimes acceptable for a Catholic priest to do so. The patient's family would need to be consulted about this.

AT THE TIME

After death, the priest says the first prayer and a candle is lit. This is repeated for 40 days, because it is believed that the soul roams on earth for 40 days, as did Christ. The lighting of the candle is symbolic in asking God for forgiveness on behalf of the deceased.

FUNERAL

At the church, every person lights a candle as they enter, in memory of the deceased. The coffin is usually open and an icon placed on the body or the coffin. At the end of the service, everyone pays respect to the deceased and the icon, by passing the coffin. At the cemetery, the last funeral prayer is said and the body is buried facing east, because when Christ was born the guiding star was in the East. The family has supplied a small bottle of wine mixed with oil and some wheat or bread, to the priest at the church. When the last prayer is finished, the priest pours the wine and oil mixture over the lowered coffin, making the sign of the cross three times, symbolising the Holy Trinity and sustenance for the departing soul. The priest sprinkles earth into the grave, followed by family and friends.

BURIAL

In the Orthodox religion, cremation is not permitted because it is believed that we are made from earth and that we shall return to the earth.

AFTER

Masses are conducted as memorials, at 3 days, 9 days, 40 days, 6 months, 12 months and 3 years. After each mass, food is eaten in honour of the deceased's soul.

HINDU

BELIEFS

Hinduism embraces a pantheon of gods and goddesses, with individual Hindus worshipping one or more of these. Hindus believe in reincarnation. When a person dies their soul merely moves from one body to the next on its path to reach Nirvana (Heaven). So, while it is a sad time when someone dies, it is also a time of celebration.

PREPARING

Family and a priest may come to pray with the dying person, sing holy songs and read holy texts. The priest may perform last rites. Other rituals can include the tying of a thread around the neck and wrist of the dying patient, the sprinkling of Ganges water, or the placing of a leaf from the sacred basil bush on the tongue.

AT THE TIME

Family will pray around the body soon after death. People try to avoid touching the body as it is considered unclean. Sacred threads and other religious objects should not be removed.

FUNERAL

The deceased will be bathed and dressed in white traditional Indian clothing. If a woman dies before her husband she will be dressed in red. The procession might pass by places that were important to the deceased. Prayers are said at the entrance to the crematorium. The body is decorated with sandalwood and flowers. Someone will read from the scriptures. The head mourner is usually a male or the eldest son and he will pray for the body's soul.

BURIAL

Hindus are cremated as they believe burning the body releases the spirit. The flames represent Brahma (the creator).

AFTER

A priest will purify the family's home with spices and incense. A mourning period begins during which friends and relatives can visit the family and offer their sympathies. After the funeral mourners must wash and change their clothing before entering the house.

One year later Shradh occurs. This is either a one-off event or may become an annual event.

Shradh is when food is given to the poor in memory of the deceased. Shradh lasts one month and a priest will say prayers for the deceased; during this time the family will not buy any new clothes or go to any parties.

JEHOVAH'S WITNESS

BELIEFS

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that when they die they go into a kind of sleep until God resurrects them from the dead. Those who gain entrance to heaven will live with God but the vast majority of mankind will be resurrected to a restored paradise on earth.

PREPARING

The church elders will visit the person, pray with them and share scripture to bring the person comfort.

AT THE TIME

No rituals are performed at time of death but an elder will give comfort to friends and family of the deceased.

FUNERAL

The funeral is usually held at the Kingdom Hall that the deceased attended or at the funeral home. The body may either be cremated or buried depending on the wishes of the deceased. Mourners will usually wear dignified clothing in muted colours out of respect for the deceased. A church elder runs the service with a sermon, prayers and singing.

BURIAL

A committal service may take place at the graveside if this is the wish of the family. It would include prayers and scripture, which will once again be lead by the church elder.

AFTER

Mourners gather at the family's house so friends and relatives can offer their sympathies. Flowers and cards are usually sent. Family and friends may come and visit the grave in the coming years to remember the deceased.

JEWISH

BELIEFS

Beliefs may vary depending on whether the Jewish person is Orthodox, Reform or Conservative. Jews believe that when they die they will go to Heaven to be with God. This next world is called Olam HaEmet or 'the world of truth'. Death is seen as a part of life and a part of God's plan.

PREPARING

Family and friends will gather. A rabbi may be called to offer comfort and to pray for the person who is dying. It is a basic tenet of Judaism that a dying person should not be left alone. The reading of Psalm 23 and the reciting of the Shema prayer may be desired.

AT THE TIME

The person's eyes are closed, the body is covered and laid on the floor and candles are lit. The body is never left alone. Eating and drinking are not allowed near the body as a sign of respect. In Jewish law, being around a dead body causes uncleanness so often the washing of the body and preparations for burial will be carried out by a special group of volunteers from the Jewish community. This is considered a holy act.

FUNERAL

Jews may not be cremated or embalmed. In Israel a coffin might not always be used but outside of Israel a coffin is almost always used. The body is wrapped in a white shroud. Mourners have the opportunity to express anguish. Tears are seen as a sign of sadness and show that the mourner is confronting death. Mourners also tear their clothing as an expression of grief.

BURIAL

The burial takes place as soon as possible following the death. Pallbearers will carry the casket to the grave. A family member will throw a handful of earth in the casket with the body. This is to put the body in close contact with the earth. Jewish law says each grave must have a tombstone to remember the deceased.

AFTER

A candle is lit after returning from the cemetery to mark seven days of mourning called Shiva. This is when people can offer sympathies to the mourners. A meal is prepared by friends to help the mourners regain their strength. Each year the anniversary of the death is commemorated according to the Hebrew calendar. This day is observed as a solemn day of remembrance.

MAORI

BELIEFS

Traditional Maori believe that the spirit continues to exist after death and that the deceased will always be a part of the marae (traditional meeting place). Once someone has died they will go to the spirit world.

PREPARING

It is important for Maori to see the person before they die if possible so friends and family will visit the person to pray and provide support.

AT THE TIME

Depending on the tribal group there may be slightly different customs followed when someone dies. The ceremony of tuku will be carried out to free the spirit from the body. The body will be prepared for example the deceased's hair may be traditionally oiled, combed and decorated with feathers. The person will be dressed in fine clothes, perhaps traditional Maori garments if that is their wish. The body will not be left alone at any time until it is buried. It will be taken to the marae so that people can pay their respects. A karanga is performed welcoming the spirit and the body onto the marae. Family and friends (whanau) share their grief openly and loudly.

FUNERAL

The night before the burial whanau gather to sing songs to remember the dead. At the funeral speeches are given and a eulogy by a close family member. After the funeral mourners wash their hands and share food. After the meal a karakia (invocation) is held, story telling about the deceased and singing. A group of Maori remains at the marae to remove the tapu (sanctity) from where the body lay.

BURIAL

The body is usually buried rather than cremated so it can be returned to Papatuanuku (mother earth). There will be a short karakia and members of the immediate family will be present.

AFTER

Once the burial has taken place the family is welcomed back onto the marae and everybody gathers for a big feast. The family's house is then blessed to make sure the spirit of the deceased does not linger in it. Close relatives may stay longer to help the immediate family get over their loss. Maori believe the dead should be remembered and respected so the family will regularly visit the grave.

MUSLIM (ISLAMIC)

BELIEFS

There are two types of Muslims – Shi'ite and Sunni, so beliefs and customs may be slightly different for each. Muslims believe that the soul continues to exist after death. During life a person can shape their soul for better or worse depending on how they live their life. Muslims believe there will be a day of judgment by Allah (God). Until then, the deceased remain in their graves but on judgment day they will either go to Heaven or Hell. Muslims accept death as God's will.

PREPARING

Muslims should be prepared for death at any time, which is partly why daily prayers are so important. A dying person may wish to die facing Mecca, the Muslim holy city. Family members and elders recite the Muslim scripture called the Koran and pray for the person. If there is no family, any Muslim can do this. Grief counselling is often not well accepted and may be considered an intrusion of privacy.

AT THE TIME

The eyes of the deceased will be closed and the body is laid out with their arms across their chest and head facing Mecca. The body will be washed by family or friends. It will be wrapped in a white shroud and prayers will be said. Contact between the body and non-Muslims is discouraged. If a non-Muslim needs to touch the body, gloves should be worn. Male staff should handle male patients, female with female patients.

FUNERAL

The body will be buried within 24 hours as Muslims believe the soul leaves the body at the moment of death. The funeral will take place either at the graveside and involve prayer and readings from the Koran.

BURIAL

No women are allowed to go into the graveyard. Before burial a prayer will be recited. Mourners are forbidden from excessive demonstrations of grief. The body will not be cremated as this is not permitted in Islam. The deceased will be buried with their face turned to the right facing Mecca. A coffin is usually not used but a chamber dug into the grave and sealed with wooden boards so no earth touches the body. The grave will usually be simple without any fancy decoration.

AFTER

Three days of mourning follows where visitors are received and a special meal to remember the departed may be held. Mourners avoid decorative jewellery and clothing. Male family members go to visit the grave daily or weekly for 40 days. There will also be prayer gatherings at the home for 40 days. After one year there will be a large prayer gathering of family and friends. After that, male family and friends visit the grave and everyone remembers the deceased in prayers.

SCIENTOLOGIST

BELIEFS

Scientologists believe that humans are immortal spiritual beings called theta-n who live several lives. Each theta-n has a body and a mind, which exists from lifetime to lifetime. When a person dies they simply move into a new life.

PREPARING

The Scientology minister may visit the person who is dying and the family providing guidance and assistance at this point in their lives. After the person has passed away the minister will offer comfort to the family and help them to organise the funeral if required.

AT THE TIME

There are no particular protocols after the person has died – it is up to the family and the wishes of the deceased.

FUNERAL

The funeral service will be taken by the Scientology minister who will ask the mourners to remember that the deceased has simply moved into a new life and to wish them well. The minister will speak directly to the theta-n acknowledging it for its contributions in this life, releasing it from any obligations and freeing it to move on to its new life. There will probably be a eulogy and reading from the Scientology scripture. It is up to family what else they want to include. The congregation is encouraged to say goodbye to the person.

BURIAL

A scientologist will usually be cremated but may also be buried. If the family goes to the gravesite some words will be said by the graveside.

AFTER

Usually families will receive mourners at their home after the funeral. Mourners may give their sympathies with flowers or cards. The deceased will be remembered on special occasions and flowers placed on the graveside.

SEVENTH DAY ADVENTIST

BELIEFS

Seventh Day Adventists believe that death is an unconscious sleep. When Christ returns to the earth he will awaken all those who believe in him and they will all go to be with God in heaven.

PREPARING

For a Seventh Day Adventist death is not something to be afraid of but is part of God's plan. The church minister or lay group leader may come and offer support to the person who is dying as well as their family.

AT THE TIME

Friends may visit and offer sympathies to the family. The church minister or lay group leader may offer assistance in helping with preparations for the funeral.

FUNERAL

The funeral will usually take place within a week. Friends may be able to view the deceased if that is what the family wishes. The service will usually take place at the church, a chapel or crematorium and include music, singing, scripture readings, a sermon and prayers.

BURIAL

Seventh Day Adventists can be buried or cremated. There will be a committal ceremony at the graveside or crematorium. The minister or lay group leader will pray and read scripture as they commit the body to the earth.

AFTER

Friends may visit the family to offer help and offer words of comfort. They may also send flowers or food to the house.

SIKH

BELIEFS

Sikhs believe in reincarnation but also that if a person lives their life according to God's plan then they can end the cycle of rebirth in this life. They believe in an afterlife where the soul meets God

PREPARING

Friends and relations will be with the dying person and recite from the Sukhnam Sahib or the Guru Granth Sahib.

AT THE TIME

After passing away the deceased will be washed and dressed in clean clothes. If the deceased has fulfilled the Sikh baptismal ritual then the five symbols of Sikh membership will also be placed in the coffin. Non-Sikhs may attend the body at death.

FUNERAL

Friends and family drive in procession to the crematorium which takes place as soon as is possible. Death is not seen as a sad occasion but an act of God and so it is forbidden to cry. There may be an opportunity to view the deceased. Hymns may be sung, prayers and the poem Sohila recited.

BURIAL

Cremation is the norm although Sikhs and only small children and babies will be buried. A male family member will switch the cremation oven on. The ashes will be spread in running water and are traditionally sent to India.

AFTER

Afterwards the mourners will come to the temple for more hymns and readings as well as the distribution of parsad, a kind of bread/pudding, which is a symbol of God's blessing. For days after the death, Guru Granth Sahib will be read or sung regularly in order to ease the sorrows of the family. After ten days another ceremony, the Bhog, is held to formally end the mourning period.

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