



CREATIVE CHOICES

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The newsletter of the Austin Memorial and Burial Information Society (AMBIS), a nonprofit, nonsectarian, educational and consumer association organized to encourage informed planning about end-of-life issues. AMBIS is a member of the Funeral Consumers Alliance.

Public viewing without embalming— If it's what you want, insist on it

by Lamar W. Hankins

My uncle called to tell me about my aunt's death and ask if I could help him with a problem he was having with the funeral director he had chosen. My uncle did not want my aunt's body embalmed, partly because he knows a bit about the embalming process and he had nursed her for nearly two years before her death, seeing her body ravaged by disease. He did not want that body to endure any more devastation from a process that was unnecessary. My aunt was from a prominent family in the area, and she had many friends who had not seen her in the past year or so and might want to see her body lying in repose.

The funeral director had told him that it was company policy not to permit a public viewing without embalming. Virtually all funeral homes in Texas and the United States have this policy. The law in most states doesn't require embalming for a public viewing, but the industry insists on it. The funeral director was willing to have a private viewing without embalming for family members, however.

I called a funeral director friend to ask some questions about the effect of my aunt's physical condition on the preparation of her body for a viewing without embalming. He reminded me that, if the extensive edema from which she had suffered for several years caused the tissue in her extremities to leak fluid, this condition could be easily managed with a plastic body suit commonly called "unionalls." As it turned out, leaking was not a problem.

I then called the owner of the funeral home, someone I had worked with a few years ago on revising Texas' funeral regulations. Because he was on vacation, I spoke to another funeral director, who objected that a viewing without embalming might create a public health problem. I told him that this simply was not true. No public health authority has ever found a lack of embalming to create a public health issue. Furthermore, I said, the burgeoning family funeral movement never does embalming and its participants have public viewings as a matter of course.

See *No embalming*, page 3, column 1

Texas Legislature fails to act on funeral bill

The funeral industry bill, introduced in the Texas House by Rep. Warren Chism (R-Pampa) and in the Texas Senate by Sen. Janek (R-Houston), died a slow death in the Calendars Committee of the House. That committee is responsible for scheduling bills to be heard on the floor of the House. Even though the bill had passed the full Senate after it had had all of its anti-family, anti-consumer provisions removed and had been approved unanimously in the House Committee on Public Health, it had one more hurdle before it could be voted on in the House. When it reached the Calendars Committee, either the crush of legislation in the closing days of the session, or action by the funeral industry prevented the bill from being scheduled for a vote on the House floor.

When the Spring issue of *Creative Choices* had to go to the printer, we did not know what would happen to the bill. Now we know. The funeral industry had wanted to prevent families from arranging a cremation directly with a crematory. This move was rejected by Sen. Janek in the

Senate. The rest of the bill, as passed by the Senate, placed responsibility solely on a cemetery for correcting a cemetery's interment of a body in the wrong gravesite. It held a family responsible for cremation of a body with a pacemaker only if the family knew of the pacemaker (a pacemaker can explode and damage the crematory if not removed before cremation).

The bill also reduced some of the paperwork needed for a cremation if the deceased left written instructions for cremation, required a method of identification of the body that would survive the cremation process (a metal ID tag is commonly used), placed the responsibility on the crematory for producing cremated remains that are small enough to be unrecognizable as human bones (four years ago, the Legislature, at the insistence of the industry, prohibited families from scattering cremated remains that are larger than 1/8 inch necessitating that a family search through the cremated remains to assure they are complying with the law). If consumers speak out, perhaps these matters will be corrected by the next Legislature. Ω

AMBIS BRIEFS

“Completing Advance Directives” Workshop

A “Completing Advance Directives” Workshop will be held in the Fall at a date and place to be determined. It will be 2 hours long and a notary will be present. To learn the time and place and register to attend, please call the office (480-0555) or send an e-mail to <daesene@sbcglobal.net>.

Notary available for AMBIS members

Jesus Lopez, AMBIS volunteer, is available to notarize advance planning documents at no charge to members at the AMBIS office on the 3rd Wednesday of each month. or call him at 928-1839 to arrange another time.

Receive newsletter electronically

If you would like to receive *Creative Choices* by email, please send the request to <mail@ambis.info>. A copy will be posted on the AMBIS website, also. If you would like to receive both a hard copy and the electronic copy, please tell us to leave you on the newsletter mailing list. Those who receive the newsletter electronically will also receive other notices of interest.

AMBIS needs volunteers

Volunteers are needed each weekday to staff the office for 4 hours in the morning. Volunteers are assured of an interesting experience answering the phone, handling questions from members and others, and helping walk-ins join AMBIS. Please call at 480-0555 or email at <mail@ambis.info> to let the Governing Council know that you can help.

AMBIS membership growth

AMBIS gained 14 new members in January 2007; 20 in February; 23 in March; 20 in April; 20 in May; 26 in June.

How people learn about AMBIS

Most people learn about AMBIS when an AMBIS member tells another person, either directly or at an event at a church or civic meeting. The following places and events have been sources of referrals since January:

All Saints Episcopal Church
Affordable Caskets
Austin-Peel Funeral Home
Bethany United Methodist
Clark Howard Radio Show
DADS Wellness Fair
Delta Kamma Gamma
Exchange Club of Austin
Fr. Amy Donohue-Adams
FCA-national
Family
Handout
Hospices (over half of all referrals)
Margie Jenkins Presentation at Redeemer Lutheran
Packet at Hancock Recreation Center
Pfluger family Advance Directives in-home presentation
Rotary Club
St. Albert the Great Catholic Social Ministry Group
St. David's Hospital SW
St. Louis Catholic Church Seminar
Cemetery survey
Senior Activity Center
The Ranch
Webpage/Internet
WildFlower UU Fellowship

Don't forget to help spread the word by telling your friends, family, and associates about AMBIS.

Creating your own Legacy

AMBIS continues in its outreach to the community through advance directive seminars, through meetings with social workers and individuals, and through its quarterly newsletter. The expense of maintaining an office, and publishing and delivering the many educational items and newsletters that we produce, requires a constant flow of contributions to make our work possible.

You can help through your tax deductible contributions (AMBIS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization). Giving to AMBIS in honor of landmark events of the people in your life or as a living memorial to those who have died is a way to guarantee that the funds will be well used to help many people right here in our own community.

An excellent tax planning idea is to make a gift of an appreciated asset such as stock or other property. AMBIS benefits from the gift, you get a charitable deduction for your taxes, and you avoid the capital gains taxes on the sale of the property. AMBIS also accepts the gift of Life Insurance or Annuities that are no longer needed in your financial plan.

AMBIS has a volunteer Registered Financial Consultant who can help you determine the best way to make a gift to the Society. Please feel free to call our office to arrange an appointment to discuss your giving plans (512-480-0555). Or send your check to AMBIS, P. O. Box 4382, Austin, Texas 78765.

Gary Lichtenstein
Director, AMBIS Governing Council
Registered Financial consultant

No embalming, continued from page 1

And the people who prepare bodies for family funerals have no training related to preparing a body for viewing and burial, so I knew such preparation is not rocket-science. He said he would have the president of the company contact me as soon as he returned from a funeral.

Two hours later, I received a call from the president of the funeral home company. He understood what my uncle wanted and my position on the issues involved. He explained that they were concerned only that the family would be happy with the result. I told him that I was sure his staff were capable of preparing my aunt's body for public viewing without embalming if they were willing to do so. He said they would do everything possible to accommodate the wishes of the family.

In the meantime, my aunt's body was refrigerated. She had died early on a Tuesday morning. That next Friday evening, our family had a two-hour public viewing at the funeral home attended by dozens of people. Other than a handful of family members, no one knew or guessed that my aunt's body had not been embalmed.

For the last two years, several articles in funeral industry publications have discussed public viewing without embalming. Some members of the profession have decided that it is time to end this practice of requiring families to have their loved one's bodies embalmed if there is to be a public viewing. The industry has no good reasons to insist routinely on this practice. Ron Hast, perhaps the most well-known and respected funeral industry publisher, and a funeral director (and embalmer) in southern California, has written eloquently on the subject. He wrote in 2005 that for the past 158 years there has been "no information ... about restrictions or concerns with disease relative to a decedent in state, and viewed by the public" when that person was not embalmed.

Hast related the explanation of body preparation without embalming provided by a long-time licensed embalmer, now retired, from a prominent funeral home in Los Angeles, Clemert Davidson:

It is more difficult to prepare and present a body for viewing without embalming. But it can be done very well and we always respected the choice of families who requested viewing and a public funeral, but no embalming. ... We positioned all bodies received with the head high; hands were crossed and secured carefully to allow natural drainage of blood away from the head and hands. Features were not set until time of preparation. The body would remain stabilized in a carefully controlled refrigeration unit at approximately 35 degrees...for at least 24 hours. This stabilizes and controls any decomposition. Approximately eight hours (five hours or slight bodies) before presentation, we placed and covered the body on a preparation table. About four hours later, we would carefully and completely towel the body dry, and again allow the body to rest until fully dry. (Note: this procedure allowed for a full four hours or more of presentation, as the internal temperature secured and stabilized any potential natural changes. Hair was dried if needed, and fin-

ished. Feature setting, nail care, hair styling and makeup were completed. Tissue building injections and aspiration of gasses and fluids were accomplished as needed. In all those years we rarely encountered any problems with excluding embalming when requested. Our fees were the same with embalming or alternative preparation. (*Mortuary Management*, July/August 2005, p.4)

Hast wrote in the October 2006 issue of *Mortuary Management* that "to say the reason for requiring embalming is 'to protect the public health' is not substantiated by any known scientific study." He quotes Bernadette Burden of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta: "We have not at any point prescribed embalming as a method of protecting public health." This fact has been pointed out for years by consumer advocates Ruth Harmer, Jessica Mitford, Lisa Carlson, and lately by Josh Slocum, now Executive Director of the Funeral Consumers Alliance, AMBIS' parent group: "(There have been) scientific studies for decades showing embalming has no bearing on public health." Slocum went on to write in the January 2007 issue of *Mortuary Management* that

For an industry that constantly complains that it doesn't get the professional recognition that it deserves, funeral service seems clueless about how to earn it. Ignoring mountains of evidence and statements from the Centers for Disease Control won't make you a profession. Unctuous sympathy and evading direct questions won't do it either. The surest way to be recognized as a true professional—and to put critics like me out of business—is simply to tell the truth to your customers and give them real choice.

Finally, everyone should remember that when Pope John Paul II died in 2005, his body was viewed in public by thousands of people over three days without traditional embalming. The body of Pope John Paul II was placed on a red velvet bier, propped at an angle at his upper body by three red pillows. Several times during the viewing, the body was freshened up in some way, but the kind of arterial and body cavity embalming widely practiced in the United States was not employed with the Pope, according to the Vatican.

If such treatment was good enough for Pope John Paul II, it should be good enough for the United States funeral industry. It is time to demand an end to the tyranny of funeral directors' insistence on embalming for public viewing. While there may be some conditions that require it, the burden should be on the industry to identify those conditions and justify its position. Otherwise, public viewing without embalming should become as common as cremation, if families prefer it.

It is disappointing that nearly all funeral homes in AMBIS' annual survey of funeral costs state on their General Price Lists (GPLs) that it is their policy to require embalming for public viewing. Families who want public viewing without embalming should insist on it, and take their business elsewhere if their wishes are not honored. It is time for the industry to end this deceitful practice. **Ω**

Please Help Us Keep Our Mailing List Current

To help us keep our mailing costs down, be sure to let AMBIS know if your address changes. If you move out of the area, we can help you transfer your membership. Send changes by email, call the AMBIS office at 512-480-0555, or send this form with the old address to AMBIS

My new or corrected address is:

Name

New or correct address

City, State, Zip

Phone

Email address



To mail an address correction, please clip and mail to AMBIS at P.O.Box 4382, Austin, TX 78765, or take to AMBIS office in the Austin Groups for the Elderly Bldg. at 3710 Cedar St. (at 38th Street), Room 112. Email an address change to <mail@ambis.info>.

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The following funeral services offer to AMBIS members a 15% discount on the costs shown on their General Price Lists:

- All Faiths Funeral Services
8507 North IH 35 (512-339-8878) and
4360 South Congress Avenue (512-326-8878)
- Austin-Peel & Son Funeral Home
607 E. Anderson Lane (512-419-7224)
- Fuller-Sheffield Funeral Home
2808 E. MLK Blvd. (512-476-9164)
- Harrell Funeral Home
4435 Frontier Trail (512-443-1366)
- Wilke-Clay-Fish Funeral Home
2620 S. Congress (512-442-1446)
- Weed-Corley-Fish Funeral Home
3125 N. Lamar (512-452-8811)

When contacting one of these funeral homes, please provide proof of your AMBIS membership by showing a copy of this newsletter addressed to you or your new membership letter. Membership can be confirmed also by calling the AMBIS office at 512-480-0555.

www.ambis.info

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CREATIVE CHOICES is published quarterly by the Austin Memorial and Burial Information Society, a nonprofit, nonsectarian consumer and educational organization formed in 1964 to protect a consumer's right to choose a meaningful, dignified, and affordable funeral.

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