

# Caring for the Dead in

## Ohio

Persons and religious groups in Ohio may care for their own dead. The legal authority to do so is found in:

*RC 3705.16—Registration of death with local registrar; certificate of death. Each death which occurs in Ohio shall be registered with the local registrar of vital statistics of the district in which the death occurred by the funeral director or other person in charge of interment or cremation of the remains.*

*RC 4717.12—Exceptions to provisions [for licencing] . . . (B) This chapter does not prevent or interfere with any of the following:*

- (1) The ceremonies, customs, religious rights, or religion of any people, denomination, or sect;*
- (2) Any religious denomination or sect, or any body composed of members of a denomination;*
- (3) Any church or synagogue committee in preparing dead human bodies for burial;*
- (4) The conducting of funerals and the burial of dead human bodies in accordance with the ceremonies or rights described in division (B) of this section without the use, employment, or supervision of a licensed embalmer or funeral director, except when the body is that of a person whose death was caused by a virulent communicable disease, in which case the rules of the department of health or board of health having territorial jurisdiction shall apply.*

There are no other statutes that might require you to use a funeral director.

### Death Certificate

Ohio has been using electronic death registration (EDR) since 2007. All funeral directors and coroners are on the system, and some hospitals and doctors in large cities are, too.

No one in the vital records office in Columbus was willing to talk to Carlson about how families could record a death without a funeral director, so she started calling local registrars in the county health departments. One told Carlson she could print off a data form for the family to fill out before getting the medical input. When Carlson checked with a county office in another part of the state, the local registrar had no idea how to print out that form or which form to print, saying she'd have to call the help desk in Columbus (the same number where a woman told Carlson she couldn't talk to "the media").

Frustrated by the difficulty in getting accurate information, Carlson fired off some other e-mails to various Department of Health people including the director. She finally got a call from someone at the help desk for EDR who was only marginally helpful, followed by another call from an administrator who had a somewhat better grasp of the issues. The local registrar would indeed print off a three-page data form found on the EDRS support site:

<http://vitalsupport.odh.ohio.gov/gd/gd.aspx>

Actually, a family may print this off ahead of time, too. The form includes both demographic information as well as medical confirmation that a death has occurred including a place for the doctor's signature and license number. Once that is filled out, the form must be faxed by the registrar to the state for entry into the system which, Carlson was assured, would be "the same day." The local registrar would then be notified by fax when the information was accepted and a blank death certificate could be printed out, so the doctor can sign the actual "certificate," not just a form. This can happen only on a weekday during business hours, of course. Do-it-yourselfers will be well-advised to walk through this procedure *way* ahead of time. We are wondering how long it will take the Ohio medical profession to get the law changed so that an actual quill-and-ink signature is no longer required.

Families caring for their own dead may find working with a coroner or funeral director helpful or necessary to deal with this ridiculously awkward process. County coroners are listed here:

[www.osca.net/ohio\\_coroners.php](http://www.osca.net/ohio_coroners.php)

When a funeral director or coroner enters the demographic information into the system, they don't have to wait for it to be "accepted." The death certificate can be printed off right away and given to the doctor to fill in and sign. It's hard to understand why local registrars are not also allowed to do this as they are in other states.

### Fetal Death

A fetal death certificate is required when gestation is 20 weeks or more.

### Transporting and Disposition Permit

The local health department or sub-registrar will issue the burial permit once the death certificate has been generated. The charge for this is \$3.00. This permit must be filed with the registrar in the district of disposition. (Some funeral directors may serve as sub-

registrars.)

When a body is brought into the state, a certificate of service must be filed with the local registrar after disposition.

## Burial

There are no state statutes that specifically permit or prohibit home burial. It is also unlikely that there are local zoning regulations regarding home burial, but you should review them before planning a family cemetery. If your land is in a rural area, draw a map of the property showing where the burial ground will be and have it filed with the deed. That may be all you have to do to establish your family cemetery. There are no state burial statutes or regulations with regard to burial locations or depth. A sensible guideline is 150 feet from a water supply, 25 feet from a power line, with two or three feet of earth on top. Plan your family cemetery away from boundaries with neighbors, too.

When burial is arranged, the family member acting as the funeral director must sign the burial-transit permit and file it with the registrar where the disposition takes place.

## Cremation

The local health department issues the cremation permit. There is a 24-hour wait prior to cremation. Authorization by next-of-kin or your designated agent is required, and a pacemaker must be removed. The crematory may offer to file the permit with the health department.

A person may authorize his/her own cremation. The form must indicate the final disposition of the cremated remains, but there is no restriction on what that may be. The wishes of a spouse or other next-of-kin may override such authorization if you have not otherwise named a designated agent for disposition.

There are no laws regarding the disposition of cremated remains. You may do as you wish.

## Other Requirements

Ohio has no embalming requirements. Weather and reasonable planning should be considered.

The body of a person who has died from a communicable disease must be buried or cremated within 24 hours.

## Medical Schools for Body Donation

Body donation to a medical school is another option for disposition. Find the information for Ohio at <[www.finalrights.org](http://www.finalrights.org)>.

## State Governance

The Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors has seven members. Two are consumer representatives, at

least one of whom must be 60 years of age or older. Of the five funeral directors, one must be knowledgeable about crematories.

<[www.funeral.ohio.gov/](http://www.funeral.ohio.gov/)>

Although crematories are licensed by the Funeral Board, one does not have to be a funeral director to run one, and many are found on cemetery grounds. A separate Crematory Review Board adjudicates complaints. Three of the board are members of the Funeral Board and three are nominated from the Cemetery Dispute Committee. A seventh member to the committee must have no affiliation with a cemetery or funeral home.

The Ohio Cemetery Dispute Resolution Commission, under the Real Estate and Professional Licensing Division of Commerce, regulates cemeteries. There are nine members, two of which represent the public. It has a helpful brochure for consumers. Most Ohio cemeteries are municipal or religious ones.

<[www.com.ohio.gov/real/CeMain.aspx](http://www.com.ohio.gov/real/CeMain.aspx)>

## Prepaid Cemetery and Funeral Funds

Seventy per cent of *cemetery services* must go into trust. For *cemetery merchandise*, 110% of cost or 30% of retail—whichever is greater—must be placed into **trust**. “**Constructive delivery**” (warehousing) can bypass trusting requirements. If you wish to cancel this purchase after the first week, your **refund** will be 60% of whatever you paid, plus 80% of the interest, less the cost of any merchandise that has been delivered to a warehouse.

Many cemeteries are making their contracts irrevocable, but the cemetery must get your signature giving up your right to revoke the contract. You probably should not agree to do so unless qualifying for Medicaid.

100% of prepaid *funeral* goods and services must be placed into **trust** with **interest** to accrue. If you do want to **cancel** your preneed arrangement, how much you get will depend: Was it a guaranteed-price arrangement? If so, you'll get back only 90% of the principal. Otherwise, you'll get back all you paid plus interest.

You may **transfer** an irrevocable preneed plan.

If the casket you picked out is not available, the funeral director may **substitute** one of equal “quality, value and workmanship.” The word “value” is a problem without a clear description. A \$900 casket ten years ago was a pretty swell casket. Today it might be bottom-of-the-line.

## Consumer Concerns

- The death rate in Ohio can support approximately 427 full-time mortuaries; there are, however, 1,167. Funeral prices tend to be higher in areas where there are “too many” funeral homes.
- Cemetery trusting requirements are inadequate. All

purchase money for burial vaults should be placed in trust, with provision for cancellation and refund; “constructive delivery” should be forbidden.

- There is no annual reporting requirement to the purchaser of prepaid funeral goods and services, paperwork that might be helpful to the family of a deceased to indicate prepayment and which would help to “enforce” trusting requirements.
- There is no state protection in the case of default of prepaid funeral monies.
- There is no provision for an adequate description of funeral goods selected preneed nor for a substitution of equal quality if the selected item is no longer available at the time of death. Survivors should be permitted to approve any substitution.
- Until “constructive delivery” is eliminated and adequate provisions for refund or transfer of all prepaid funeral money plus interest are enacted, it is probably a *terrible* idea to prepay for a funeral in Ohio.
- There is no requirement to identify and tag the body at the place of death before removal.
- There is no provision either forbidding a mark-up on cash advance items or requiring the disclosure of how much the mark-up would be.
- There is no requirement that low-cost caskets be included in any display.
- The standards for professional conduct are weak should be well-defined. That would make it easier for a consumer to prevail when filing a valid complaint.
- Complaint procedures are unclear and inadequate.
- If you die with limited funds and no prepaid funeral arrangements, look who gets your money and in what order:

- the lawyers handling your estate
- \$4,000 to the funeral director and \$3,000 for the cemetery
- support for surviving spouse and minor children
- “debts entitled to a preference” under U.S. law
- the doctor and hospital, medical
- another \$2,000 for the funeral director if more is owed . . .
- taxes and Medicaid claims
- debts for manual labor not to exceed \$300 (home health aides gets shafted if not considered a medical expense)
- other debts

- Funeral directors are exempt from the telephone solicitation laws.

### Miscellaneous Information

- Educational requirements for an embalmer: a four-year college degree, one year of mortuary college, and one year of apprenticeship. For a funeral director:

bachelor's degree and two years of apprenticeship. A four-year degree plus one additional year of mortuary school can reduce the apprenticeship to one year. All must pass an exam on state laws and a “nationally recognized” exam. Typically, this is the National Board Exam which practitioners and consumer advocates alike have deemed out-of-date and irrelevant. (Minnesota is the only other state that requires funeral directors to have a four-year degree.)

- Coroners are elected. They must be licensed physicians.
- No person may picket a funeral home, church, or cemetery within 300 feet or one hour before and during a funeral, nor may one picket a funeral procession.
- A commercial pet cemetery must be at least three acres, with a beginning endowment fund of \$12,000. Fifty dollars from each lot sale must be added to the fund.
- Coal mining is not allowed within 100 feet of a cemetery.
- The town or county is responsible for the burial or cremation of indigents and/or unclaimed bodies. The law specifically states that if the body is claimed by an indigent relative (someone who is poor) the municipality is still responsible for the disposition. Families should expect direct cremation only; local governments are not going to pay for anything beyond the basics.
- You may name a designated agent for body disposition, helpful if you are estranged from your legal next-of-kin.
- Administrative code requires funeral homes to abide by the FTC Funeral Rule.
- Tissue banks must be accredited by the American Association of Tissue Banks. With new standards for nontransplant tissue banks, there should be good regulation of the body parts business.
- A permit for disinterment must be obtained from the Probate Court.

*This chapter was sent for review to the Ohio Department of Health, the Ohio Cemetery Dispute Resolution Commission, and the Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors. A small correction was made by the cemetery committee. No other responses were received when the chapter was finished, but there had been much communication during the research process.*

**UPDATE HISTORY**—This chapter was amended 11/26/2012 to correct information about government help with indigent deaths.



# Necessary Information

Many people over the years have asked for a checklist for performing a family-directed funeral. Would that were so easy! While the process is not excessively complicated, there are many things families need to contemplate and many differences in state laws, so it is impossible to distill the process into a sound-byte-style checklist.

There are, however, some basic components common every family-directed disposition:

1. A doctor, medical examiner, or nurse practitioner must certify the death by completing the medical information on the death certificate.
2. The death certificate must be completed and filed before the body is buried or cremated.
3. Most states require you to get a permit for transportation or disposition before moving the body and before final disposition.
4. You will need to do a walk-through ahead of time with all parties involved, from the local registrar of vital statistics to the cemetery, crematory, or medical school where the body will end up. Some of these parties may need to be shown in advance that what you're doing is legal if they haven't experienced a family-directed funeral before.

## Avoiding Careless Errors

Those who choose to handle death privately must take great care to follow all state and local regulations. The requirements are not complex, but failure to meet them can lead to unpleasant situations and create a climate in which professionals become less willing to work with families.

One crematory, for example, was sued for rejecting a body sent by a family. The case was thrown out of court, and rightly so, because the family had merely hired someone to deliver the body without a death certificate, transit permit, or authorization from next-of-kin for cremation. Another crematory will no longer accept bodies directly from families because in one case, the family had assumed that medical personnel would fill out the forms properly. While that seems like a reasonable assumption, in this case the cause of death as stated by the medical

examiner on the permit to cremate was not written exactly as it had been on the death certificate, and the state later made an issue of it. In short, the procedures are quite simple and straight-forward, but it is necessary to pay close attention to the details and to be vigilant about errors that may be made by others.

## Death Certificate

Great care must be taken in completing the death certificate. Whiteout or other corrections are not usually permitted. If an error is made, you may have to start over again with a new certificate. Most states have implemented an Electronic Death Registration (EDR) system, which doctors and funeral directors can log into rather than writing on a piece of paper. Private individuals will not be allowed to use the on-line system, but vital statistics departments should have a paper alternative for families who perform their own funerals. Check your state chapter and your local vital statistics office ahead of time for the proper procedure.

For all deaths, a death certificate signed by a doctor stating the cause of death must be filed— usually in the county or district where death occurs, or where a body is found, or where a body is removed from a public conveyance or vehicle.

If complicated laboratory work is needed to accurately determine the exact cause of death, the physician or medical examiner may write “pending” or a similar phrase for the cause of death and release the body for disposition. In those few cases, a delayed or corrected death certificate will be sent to the state registrar by the physician when the cause of death is known.

In addition to the medical portion, facts such as “mother’s maiden name” must be provided by the family. Unless the signature of a licensed funeral director is required by state statute, the family or church member who is handling the arrangements must sign the death certificate (or paper alternative in states with EDR) in the space marked “funeral director,” followed by his or her relationship to the deceased, immediately after the signature.

States vary in the time required for filing the death certificate with the local registrar, but this must usually be accomplished before other permits are granted and before final disposition.

## **Fetal Deaths and Miscarriages**

A special death certificate or fetal death report is required in all but two states for fetal deaths. Eleven states seem to require registration of all fetal deaths. In a majority of states, a fetal death must be registered if it occurs after 20 weeks of pregnancy. In Hawaii, the requirement goes into effect after 24 weeks. Some states gauge pregnancy duration by fetal weight, e.g., 350 grams (12½ oz.), and because any unattended death—including fetal death—could require a coroner's investigation, a physician should be called. Even if there is uncertainty as to whether reporting requirements are applicable, reporting a fetal death may be helpful in obtaining insurance benefits in some situations.

## **Autopsies: Dealing with a Coroner/ Medical Examiner's Office**

Autopsies are generally required when cause of death is violent, unexpected, uncertain, or "unusual," including suicide. For this reason, the police should be called when death occurs outside a hospital or nursing home, is "unattended," and falls into one of the categories above. But it is not necessary to call 911 for an ambulance or police if the death is not unusual. For example, it wouldn't make sense to call 911 if Grandma died in her sleep at 85, and doing so would bring on unnecessary commotion.

Death from a contagious or infectious disease may also necessitate involvement with a coroner or local health officer.

When donating the body to a medical school, a family should request that no autopsy be performed. The decision will depend on circumstances surrounding the death, and the state may order an autopsy in suspicious cases.

The practices in coroners' offices vary widely. In California, it is legal for medical examiners to amputate fingers for identification and remove tissue and organs for study. One woman discovered that her father had been buried without his heart when she arrived at a workers' compensation hearing and saw the heart presented as evidence.

The condition in which a medical examiner or coroner returns an autopsied body varies considerably. We've had reports from families and home funeral guides stating the body was barely tacked back together, and work had to be done to better sew up the incisions. Some families planning a home funeral might wish to engage a funeral director for this. On the other hand, we've heard from several families who did this work themselves.

The term *medical examiner* is usually reserved for those with medical training, and the person in such a position is often appointed by the department of health. In a few states, the word *coroner* is used interchangeably with medical examiner. Generally, however, the term coroner implies an elected position. In California, a

medical degree is required for a candidate to run for coroner. In many other states, however, anyone may run for the office, with or without medical training. A coroner may be a practicing funeral director or have a direct relationship with a funeral home. In Pennsylvania, more than half the coroners' offices have a funeral director on the staff. To avoid any appearance of impropriety, a coroner or medical examiner may rotate pick-up calls among all funeral homes within the jurisdiction, but this is not always the case. Funeral directors from various states have complained that a local coroner-funeral director ends up getting more business when he's on duty as the coroner. This is unethical, and consumers have no obligation to use the funeral home whose director is acting for the state as a coroner.

## **Home Death, Home Visitation**

With hospice support, many people are able to die at home in familiar surroundings, near familiar faces. In some states, an "expected" death can be certified by an attending nurse. A home death can allow the family time to obtain permits and make necessary arrangements.

Turning off the heat in a room or turning on an air-conditioner can make it reasonable to contain a body without further action for 24 to 72 hours or more. People often ask, "Doesn't the body smell?" No, not usually for the first two or three days, at 70 degrees or less, but each situation must be considered individually. Often in waning days a failing person stops eating and drinking, so the body will become somewhat dehydrated before death. Noxious odors are therefore unlikely during the next few days. The robust body of someone who finished a meal of corned beef and cabbage just prior to death, however, might produce telltale odors.

For some, there is therapeutic value in keeping the body at home for at least a brief period, allowing the family a chance to congregate and deal with the death, as often occurred in the front parlor two or three generations ago.

## **Nursing Home Death**

When death is anticipated in a nursing home, it will be important to work out your plans with the nursing home staff ahead of time. If the deceased has had only a semi-private room, for example, the nursing home may have no other location to hold the body while paperwork and other errands are done. Staff members are accustomed to calling a funeral director, regardless of the hour, for quick removal. Out of consideration for other residents, it may not be feasible for the nursing home personnel to allow a long delay while permits, a container, and vehicle are obtained.

When Carlson's Uncle Henry died at a care facility, she didn't have a dignified way to move the body out. She called a friendly funeral director to pick up and bring the

body to her home where it was placed in a cremation box. She and her husband drove it from there to the crematory.

### **Hospital Death**

Disposition of a fetal or infant death can be handled entirely by the hospital as a courtesy if a family so chooses. When other deaths occur in a hospital, the relative on hand should ask the nursing staff to remove any life-support articles such as catheters, IV needles, and feeding or breathing tubes. A catheter is held in place by a “balloon” and is not as simple to remove as an IV needle. Some of the nasal tubes appear especially disfiguring after death and may be of concern to other family members who are expected later to help with the death arrangements.

Some hospitals may be reluctant to release a body directly to a family without the use of a funeral director. If the death is expected, you should alert the hospital staff of your intentions ahead of time. If hospital personnel are confused or believe incorrectly that they can refuse to release the body to the family, a telephone call from your lawyer (or Funeral Consumers Alliance) may be in order. It is also important for families to recognize the legitimate needs of hospitals. Some hospitals may have no storage facilities for dead bodies while permits are obtained and may insist on calling a funeral director for immediate removal after death if there is to be any significant delay.

### **Body and Organ Donation**

Donation of eyes and other organs must be done under sterile conditions and usually within a short time after death. Because organ-donor cards may not be immediately available to hospital personnel, next-of-kin should make the decision to donate known to attending staff at the earliest time possible. Hospital employees are often reluctant to approach a grieving, distressed family. Anyone who can find emotional healing in a gift of life or sight is encouraged to take the initiative in making such an offer even if the time of death is uncertain. The corneas of elderly persons can usually be used, and eyes (and sometimes skin) may be donated even if total body donation to a medical school is subsequently planned.

With the increasing success of organ transplants, consideration should be given to whether organ donation takes priority over body donation. There may develop a competition between those needing body parts and those who need whole bodies. Loss of a major organ involving a thoracic incision usually makes a body unacceptable for a teaching donation because of the difficulty in embalming a system interrupted by recent surgery. Carlson and her husband, Steve, have written in on the body donation cards they carry that organ donation is to be considered first. If organ donation is not needed, only then should their bodies be considered for body donation to a medical

school. If their bodies are not accepted, they want a plain pine box send-off.

Body donation to a medical school may be an option even if the deceased has not enrolled in such a program. For up-to-date information about the needs and requirements of medical schools, as well as for-profit and nonprofit companies that accept body donations, check our website: <[www.finalrights.org](http://www.finalrights.org)>

### **Embalming**

No state requires routine embalming of all bodies. Special circumstances—such as an extended time between death and disposition—may make it necessary under state law. Interstate transportation by a common carrier may also necessitate embalming, although most airlines will waive that requirement if there are religious objections. Refrigeration or dry ice can take the place of embalming in many instances. Check the Yellow Pages (or the on-line equivalent) for a source of dry ice. Frozen gel packs such as those used for picnic coolers can also work, though you will need enough to swap out when one set gets warm. In some states, embalming may be required by law if the person has died of a communicable disease, although this is a seriously flawed requirement.

### **Moving A Body**

Never move a body without a permit (or without medical permission if your state allows that in lieu of a permit) Always call ahead before moving a body even if you have a permit. A medical school, cemetery, or crematory staff member who is unprepared, or a town clerk who just isn't sure about family burial plots may need some time and help in doing his or her job. By calling first to make arrangements at the destination, you will be expected and prepared. Remember that even if your state permits families to perform their own funerals, crematories, cemeteries, and medical schools are not legally required to work directly with consumers. You will want to know in advance whether the staff will accept the body directly from you (and you may be able to persuade them to do so by explaining your plans in advance).

The use of a simple covered box allows some dignity for all involved in the handling and moving of a body, regardless of final disposition. If a family chooses to build the container for delivery of a body for cremation, they should consider the size. A standard cremation chamber opening is 38 inches wide and 30 inches high. A container two feet wide and 14 to 18 inches deep is usually sufficient for most bodies, however. One crematory mentioned that most home-made boxes tend to be too large. Simple cardboard containers (or caskets) can be purchased from funeral homes (though some will refuse to sell the box only). Or check the internet; the FCA site at <[www.funerals.org](http://www.funerals.org)> has a listing of casket sellers in many parts of the country, and many will ship a simple

cardboard or wood casket in knockdown form, ready to assemble. Some boxes are more expensive than others because of construction. Some are paraffin-coated, others plastic-lined, and some have plywood bottoms. You should also consider the length of the box when you choose the vehicle for transportation.

Most states require a permit for transportation or disposition. The death certificate must usually be completed first, and often a special permit-to cremate is needed prior to cremation. In many states, funeral directors serve as deputy registrars. If death occurs when local municipal offices are closed, a funeral director may be needed to furnish or sign the disposition or transit permit, especially in states using electronic death registration (EDR) widely. As a deputy of the state in this function, the funeral director should not charge for this service unless such a charge is set by the state.

### **Body Fluids**

After death, the blood in a body settles to the lowest points, leaving the upper portions pale and waxy, with purple mottling below. Some parts of the body may swell a little. Fluids may be discharged from body orifices. It will be helpful to use absorbent material—such as towels or newspapers—underneath. A sheet can help with wrapping and moving the body. If the person has died from a communicable disease, it will be important to take all health precautions. Use a pair of latex rubber gloves. Your state may require the use of a funeral director in such a case. Consult your family doctor for instructions if the information for your state is not specific or if you are concerned.

When an autopsy has been performed or death occurs from trauma, the body may be wrapped in a vinyl body bag—available from a funeral director—to prevent additional leakage or seepage. A plastic, zippered mattress cover might work as well. However, if you plan on cremation, avoid any such materials whenever possible.

### **Out-of-State Disposition**

All states honor properly acquired permits of other states when a body is to be moved interstate. There may be local regulations for disposition, however. Check by telephone before setting out for the destination.

### **Burial**

In some states, when burial will be outside the county or town where death occurred, you will need an additional permit to inter (whether on private land or in a cemetery) from the local registrar in that area. The statutes and regulations of some states include depth requirements for burial; these are listed in the state chapters in this book. Standard practice in many states is to place the top of the coffin at least three feet below the natural surface of the earth. A burial location should be 150 feet or more from a

water supply and outside the easement for any utility or power lines.

### **Cremation**

When cremation is chosen, an additional permit is often required from the local coroner or medical examiner. There is a fee for this which varies by state; the highest we know of is Oklahoma's \$150 charge. If the deceased did not sign a cremation authorization prior to death, authorization from next-of-kin or a designated agent is required by most crematories. Usually this can be obtained by fax, Western Union, or overnight mail if family members live out of state.

Next-of-kin is determined in this order (although it varies slightly from state to state):

- (1) surviving spouse
- (2) adult sons and daughters
- (3) parents
- (4) adult siblings
- (5) guardian or "person in charge"

That is, if there is a surviving spouse, his or her permission is all that is required. If there is no surviving spouse but several children, all adult sons and daughters may be required to grant permission for disposition by cremation (though some states require only one adult child to consent). Adult siblings must assume responsibility if no spouse, offspring, or parents survive.

Be sure to check the chapter for your state to see if the law allows you to designate an agent to carry out your wishes for final disposition. "Designated agent" laws allow a person to choose anyone (it need not be a family member) to have the sole legal authority to direct the cremation or other form of disposition. It is extremely helpful to name an agent ahead of time so that family disputes will not hold up the arrangements or wind up in probate court. Gay, lesbian, and transgender people should take special care to designate an agent if their state has a designated-agent law. We have seen some terrible problems with blood families swooping in to take the body away from the decedent's same-sex partner. (This problem can also be averted, of course, in the increasing numbers of states with same-sex marriage.)

A pacemaker must be removed before cremation. The services of an attending physician, the medical examiner, or a funeral director can be requested for this. On the other hand, one funeral director told Carlson, "Anyone can do it." A pacemaker is about the size of a silver dollar, embedded just under the skin, usually near the neck or lower on the rib cage. A shallow incision with an X-Acto knife would make it readily accessible, and the wires to which it is attached should be snipped. If a pacemaker is not removed and explodes during the cremation process, repairing damage to the cremation chamber may be the liability of the person delivering the body.

## Selecting a Crematory

There is no consistency among the states when it comes to the operation of crematories. Some states allow only cemeteries to run crematories, barring funeral homes from owning them. A few other states allow only funeral homes to operate crematories, and bar freestanding crematories from doing business directly with the public. Still other states permit crematories to operate independently and do business with consumers directly. Generally, crematories run by funeral homes are less likely to work directly with a family, as they want consumers to pay them to do everything. At Cook-Walden funeral home in Austin, Texas (owned by SCI), the staff told an FCA board member that they would accept the body and the death certificate directly from the family, but the direct cremation price was the same (\$2,400!) even though the family would be doing almost all the work.

As with all entities involved in a family-directed funeral, you may need to contact several crematories ahead of time to find one that will work with you. Carlson took Uncle Henry to a crematory an hour and a half away where the cost was \$225. The nearby crematory would not take a body from a family, and lists prices close to those in Austin, Texas.

## Obituary (Death Notice)

Traditionally, an *obituary* is a news article published when a well-known person dies. A *death notice* is called in by the family or funeral director and published, usually at a price, to inform others that death has occurred. However, in current usage, the terms are generally interchangeable.

When a death occurs, it is almost impossible to personally notify everyone who knew or cared about the deceased. Close friends and relatives, of course, should be informed by phone before they read about the death in the newspaper. But a death notice may help assure that the news reaches a wider circle of acquaintances in a timely manner. It should mention any services planned, even if a memorial gathering is scheduled for a later date.

More people are learning about the deaths of friends and acquaintances on-line than ever before. As newspaper readership declines, putting a notice of death on your—or the decedent's—Facebook page (or other social media) may spread the news more quickly than relying on a newspaper obituary alone. While e-mail is considered by some to be the most impersonal form of communication, many people are grateful to be notified quickly by e-mail, especially if they spend a lot of time on-line.

If you do choose an obituary, call the paper to learn its policies and any costs. Your local paper may have a

standard format for obituaries or expect certain information to be included. An obituary can generally be phoned in or e-mailed. If there is no funeral director involved, the person at the paper may ask for a copy of the death certificate just to be sure that the obit is not a practical joke (as has happened from time to time).

The cost varies a lot but can be quite high; it's not uncommon to see obituary charges of \$500 or more. Of course, most people want the obituary to tell the story of the person who died, and the longer it is, the higher the price. When Slocum's close friend died in 2010, the obituary Slocum wrote would have cost \$700 to put in the *Syracuse Post-Standard* (and it wasn't that long). The funeral director suggested putting only the necessary details about the time and place for Michael's memorial service in the paper, and publishing the longer obituary on the funeral home's website, which they offered free. Thank you, Newcomer Funeral Home.

Lisa's Uncle Henry was a colorful character—a friendly, witty street person who got to know almost everybody he met. A long obit with several of his life stories was the only practical way to get the word out to everybody. It was expensive, but was the one costly item that seemed important.

## Miscellaneous but Still Important

- It is not uncommon for family members to forget to remove jewelry at the time of death.
- A family using the time of a mortician for advice should find it reasonable to pay a consultant's fee.
- If a person who works in a funeral home or crematory offers to file a death certificate, you should expect to pay for the service.

When private death arrangements are made in an area of the country where the practice is still uncommon, you can expect some hesitancy on the part of involved persons such as registrars and town clerks. Some hospitals may even be reluctant to release the body to a family.

We have tried to include in each state chapter relevant legal citations enabling family disposition. People in authority, accustomed to delegating their duties to funeral directors, may have to be informed of their responsibilities. That can be frustrating, particularly when you are enduring a time of loss and grief. The majority of these people will probably be concerned with performing their duties appropriately. Few will intentionally want to hinder your choice if you have followed all required procedures and if you seem well-informed.