

The Last Part of Life Is Changing

This article should help bereavement carers to better appreciate the diverse and changing roles of funeral directors, cemeteries and memorialization. It highlights the evolving nature of our community, funerary practices and cemetery interment options. It also provides insight into the findings from a recent Cemeteries and Crematoria Association of New South Wales cemetery operator workshop.

From a holistic perspective, cemeteries do more than provide a repository for human remains. They are custodians of history, heritage places, a point of reflection, and a focal point for families and the community. Cemeteries also provide public open spaces. The associated gardens and spaces are accessible by the wider community, not just those families who have used interment services. They are a community asset. In the face of societal change, the roles of cemeteries and funeral directors are evolving.

Social Evolution

Broader social trends impact the nature of demand for cemetery goods and services. Australian social commentators associate the past 60 years with a variety of phenomena, including:

- a diminution of the visible role of Christian churches;
- the transition from a local to a metropolitan and then a global village;
- more visible evidence of multiculturalism;
- breakdown of the traditional nuclear family;
- the increasing importance of technology;
- a majority of deceased being cremated rather than buried;
- a breakdown in face-to-face interpersonal communications; and
- an expectation that communication and responses to queries will be instant.

In parallel, the funeral industry has recognized some more specific trends that should impact the approach to long-term cemetery planning.

Bodily Disposition Preferences

While burial has historically been the usual form of bodily disposition, cremation now accounts for the majority of cases. The actual rate of cremation in different areas varies, depending predominantly upon

the proximity of the nearest cremation facility and the proportion of the local population adhering to religious principles that promote burial as the most acceptable means of bodily disposition (e.g. Islam, Judaism, Greek and Russian Orthodox).

Around Australia, the cremation rate in metropolitan areas is now likely to exceed 65%. In aggregate, less than one-third of the cremated remains are likely to be interred within a grave or cemetery's cremation memorial area.

Historically, the church and/or the local cemetery were the normal place to inter remains. With the breakdown of the church, the scattering of population and the emergence of a disposable society, that world is gone forever.

According to a study conducted in the United Kingdom by YouGov (Smith, 2016):

Nearly six in ten people (58%) want to be cremated when they die—more than three times the 17% of people who want to be buried... Of these people, the vast majority (79%) would then like their ashes to be scattered somewhere. Just 7% want their ashes to be kept after they've been cremated.

That result is similar to the Australian experience.

The impact of the recent edict by the Roman Catholic Church, advocating placement of cremated remains in sacred places and discouraging scattering, is yet to become clear. It is likely to foster commercial relationships between funeral directors and churches to create additional interment positions within church niches and gardens.

Funeral Service Styles

The increase in cremation has generated an evolution in funeral service organization. Traditionally, funerals were arranged as a dual service. It began at a church and was followed by a committal service at a cemetery. With the breakdown of the church and the increase in cremation, a single service structure became the norm. More cremation services were conducted in funeral directors' premises or a church or a hall, and families did not attend the crematorium. Alternatively, the mourners gathered at the crematorium chapel.

More recently, "no service, no attendance" (NSD) has been gaining popularity. The cremation usually occurs without family in attendance or a coffin being present at a funeral. Sometimes a memorial service occurs, sometimes not. Within metropolitan areas, funeral



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directors appear to have NSD rates approximating 20%.

After the NSD, the family is then left to consider whether to memorialize, scatter or store the cremated remains (if they collect them), or scatter or memorialize at some stage in the future.

With burial, unless there is a strong church affiliation there appears to be a local trend to having a single service at the graveside, then gathering elsewhere afterwards for refreshments.

At least the gravesite creates a potential point of perpetual focus for the bereaved, should they need it. The fact that surrounding graves are likely to have a plaque, headstone or monument in place no doubt fosters an awareness that memorialization is the next step. This is not the case with cremation.

Psychologically, for whatever reason, cremated remains do not appear to foster the same focus. Often they remain uncollected at the funeral directors or sit at home in a cupboard. Funeral directors, whose businesses do not directly provide for cremation memorialization, appear less likely to alert client families to the options for disposing cremated remains.

Market Structure

In years gone by, the operator of the local funeral business was probably an offshoot of a hardware or plumbing business. There were few barriers to entry and little regulation, especially in remote areas.

Some of these businesses acquired competitors or were in turn taken over by other entities (e.g. credit unions). In the 1990s, a number of North American funeral conglomerates acquired Australian businesses. Ultimately they “left the country”, disposing of their interests to local venture capital groups or through management buyouts or evolving into local conglomerates. This transition in market structure permanently changed the marketplace, from both a client family and cemetery perspective.

The impact of these changes is less visible within Western Australia and Victoria, where cremation facilities cannot be provided by private enterprises. Cemeteries and crematoria are operated by municipal councils or not-for-profit trusts.

In the other states and territories, the evolving consortia purchased what had previously been competing funeral homes, established cremation facilities, and expanded service provision with chapels and by offering refreshments after funerals. In addition, some of the remaining independent funeral directors installed their own cremators.

Within the current marketplace, private entities are not likely to operate a cemetery unless it is already part of a previous acquisition or is directly associated with a funeral home or crematorium. These entities are well aware of the perpetual maintenance costs of cemetery

operations and the impact of the finite nature of interment space upon future revenue.

In turn, faced with declining rates of bodily and cremated remains interment, cemetery operators may experience challenges. While they have to maintain their sites forever, they may well be faced with diminishing visitation and revenue limitations.

In this situation, some proactive responses are apparent.

Catering for Change

The increase in cremation rates has generated an evolution in related merchandise. In the past, brick wall niches and gardens were regarded as the usual memorialization options for cremated remains. That is no longer the case.

Not only has the range of garden positions increased, but also the associated merchandise offerings. For example, cremated remains may be:

- interred within retaining walls, landscape features and family estates in cemeteries;
- used to create gemstone jewellery;
- mixed with oil paints to personalize artwork or with concrete to create reefs;
- fired into outer space;
- mixed with other chemicals to transform the remains into absorbable plant nutrients;
- split and shared between family members; or
- housed within urns, vases and other receptacles that may be kept at home or displayed.

The innovation being seen in the marketplace is primarily in relation to alternative approaches to cremated remains disposition, online memorials and site use.

Proactive cemeteries recognize the need to, in effect, become event managers. Apart from supporting the traditional Remembrance Day services, they are now promoting the use of site facilities for:

- services on religious holy days and family anniversaries;
- botanical and historic tours;
- local community gatherings within site cafes and chapels;
- hosting bereavement groups, wellness centres and yoga groups;
- creating token memorials as focal points for reflection upon persons or groups that may not actually have remains interred within the cemetery

(e.g. seamen lost at sea, missing persons or family members interred overseas),

- weddings; and
- revenue-generating activities that are not necessarily related to the funeral service activity.

Cemetery gardens can create beautiful environments. They lend themselves to establishing facilities that leverage these garden outlooks. Events, cafes and refreshment facilities may be developed as major revenue streams within site facilities. This enhances the operational viability of the organization and promotes public use of the sites.

Unless cemetery operators recognize the need to efficiently use space and increase the focus on revenue generation, their capacity to meet the cemetery's perpetual maintenance costs will be further compromised.

Intergenerational Costs

Where interment spaces for both bodily and cremated remains are made available in perpetuity, they utilize a limited resource—land. The site has to be looked after forever. Just how well it is looked after will depend upon the approach taken by the custodians of the time.

Historic experience clearly demonstrates that subsequent generations move on. Generally, they don't accept responsibility for the costs associated with maintaining interment locations.

As a cemetery approaches capacity, the question then arises as to who is responsible for establishing a greenfield (i.e. new site).

While the increased focus upon cremation has slowed the rate of utilization of land for bodily interment positions, it has also been accompanied by a decline in memorialization rates overall.

Questions related to this were the focus of the Cemeteries and Crematoria Association of New South Wales (CCANSW) cemetery operator workshop in May 2019. CCANSW's preparedness to share the key findings from that event reflects its professional commitment to educating the community.

Why Do People Memorialize?

From the experience of the cemetery operators in attendance, there would appear to be a significant number of variables that may influence decisions about memorialization. These may be grouped loosely within four categories.

Create a Record for Posterity

The memorial creates a family history record (ancestry), reflects the family lineage and provides a permanent marker in a cared-for environment. It acknowledges a life that was lived. It may give an impression of social status, contribution to society or achievements. It may also honour the decedent and record related feelings.

Respecting Beliefs and Wishes

At times, the decisions appear to be influenced by feelings of obligation to memorialize in a particular manner. This may reflect:

- an understanding of the decedent's personal wishes, or those of the decision-maker acting on their behalf;
- traditional family approaches to previous interments;
- religious traditions; or
- the desire to facilitate future recognition of the life (e.g. for anniversary services).

Creating a Focal Point for Reflection

Some respondents identified the importance of the memorial as a focal point for reflection. It creates a place to go to, with visitation potentially providing comfort and a poignant place to work through related feelings (e.g., grief, sadness, guilt, etc.).

As a focal point for reflection, the process associated with agreeing upon the appropriate location, style and wording of the memorial also prompts interaction between those involved and reflection upon the life that was lived.

Bereavement Process

The potential importance of the memorial as part of the healing process, as a physical symbol of the end of a life and assisting in "closure", was a repeated theme within participant responses.

What Type of Memorials?

Regardless of whether the bodily disposition is by burial or cremation, a subsequent memorial may be established for an individual, family or specific community group (e.g., lodge or veterans), or as a communal area (e.g., an individual memorial with a garden bed).

In recent years, significant enhancements have been made with etching bronze, glass plaques and headstones, QR codes, microchipping and establishing interactive memorials.

On Site

With bodily interment, the style of memorialization traditionally reflects the designated nature of the interment area, which may include:

- crypts or mausolea;
- a full monumental area (i.e., able to cover the grave surface);
- a headstone on a lawn beam;
- a headstone or rock memorials in a garden area;
- in-ground and above-ground vaults;

- natural burials; or
- a plaque on a lawn beam or within a lawn.

Usually, cremated remains can also be interred into positions designated for bodily interment. Most cemeteries will also provide designated cremation memorial locations (e.g., within garden beds, niche walls, around trees, etc.).

Memorials can also be created in memory of people whose remains are not interred within the cemetery. They might relate to deaths where interment occurred elsewhere, for missing persons or babies, or in commemoration of lives lost at sea, etc. Often, these are referred to as token memorials.

Off Site

Recognizing that client families do not always want to create a memorial within a cemetery, some cemetery operators are being proactive and developing other alternatives, including:

- online memorials;
- public memorials;
- roadside memorials;
- scattering at sea;
- seaside memorials;
- street, park, grandstand, etc.; and
- utilizing public spaces (e.g. municipal gardens).

As the tastes, incomes and preferences of the evolving client base change over time, cemetery operators also need to evolve their memorialization offerings.

Product Mix

The range of interment areas and memorialization offerings will, understandably, vary between cemeteries. Cemetery operators should tailor their product mix in relation to the volume of prospective interments, the nature of the community being served, and the relative impact on the perpetual maintenance costs of the site.

Cemetery operators should not feel obliged to offer an unlimited range of products. As new products are introduced, it may well be appropriate to discontinue some existing offerings. The key is to tailor the range of goods and services offered to the current and anticipated future demand (not to the past).

Innovative Ideas

While interment of bodily remains is still predominantly confined to cemeteries, memorialization of cremated remains has fewer physical constraints. In our increasingly technological and sustainability-focused world, traditional interment approaches may well be less relevant.

Interest is developing in relation to alternative approaches, including:

- creating marine memorials (i.e., incorporating cremated remains in breakwater concrete blocks);
- “floating” niche walls within cemetery water features;
- building multi-story, above-ground cemetery spaces;
- incorporating cremated remains within artwork and sculptures, and even relocating them periodically (e.g., family sharing); and
- composting bodily remains.

While these ideas might seem radical at the moment, remember that social customs evolve. For instance, 75 years ago cremation rates were low, even in capital cities.

Virtual Reality

The industry is already implementing some technological approaches (e.g., online booking systems, interactive record searches and virtual memorials).

Other opportunities are arising, including:

- virtual reality (e.g., virtual flowers, virtual stories);
- interactive talkback incorporating personal messages and recordings made accessible online and within memorials;
- hologram headstones;
- Facebook memorials; and
- cremated remains launched into space or onto the Moon.

The challenge for cemetery operators is to be able to cost-effectively deliver what families might want. Economies of scale may favour larger cemetery operators.

Mindsets Evolve over Time

The challenge faced by funeral directors and cemetery operators alike is that community expectations are continuously evolving, albeit at varying paces. Similarly, the legislative framework is slow to respond to the changing environment. When it does, the community may also take time to take up new opportunities.

This is illustrated by the recent experience in New South Wales (NSW). Recognizing the issues associated with both diminished availability of cemetery land and the intergenerational costs of perpetual maintenance, in 2018 the NSW legislation was varied to allow interment rights to be sold with limited tenure (i.e., a grave is not forever). In effect, it

may be recycled. The changes to tenure are not retrospective.

While this approach has been operating within Western Australia and South Australia for decades, cemetery operators in NSW have been slow to change their approach. This option is also challenging the NSW community's mindset. However, over time it may become more acceptable (just as it is with cremated remains).

Learning from Experience

One way for carers to assist families is to promote awareness of the options available for bodily disposition and memorialization. Recognizing the evolving nature of community expectations, funeral practices and cemetery memorialization offerings, families need reassurance that their personal wishes should influence the outcome.

Nowadays, funeral directors and cemetery operators are more likely to be flexible in their approach. They can tailor their offerings to the tastes, preferences and income of their client families. In that context, the key is to encourage families to consider what they would like to do to celebrate and remember the life that was lived and to clearly communicate their expectations.

References

Smith, M. (2016, August 17). *Majority of people want to be cremated when they die*. YouGov. Retrieved from <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2016/08/16/majority-people-want-be-cremated-when-they-die>.

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