

Don't Blame Me

About 50 percent of all bodies today are not embalmed due to the public not seeing the economics of the funeral service. That is your fault, not mine.

Dear Mr. Isard,
I read an article you wrote last year and have been angry ever since. Your article promoted the elimination of embalming in funeral service. I have been a licensed embalmer for 45 years. I have taught embalming at an outstanding mortuary school for the last 15 years. You, sir, appear to have no idea of the reason for embalming or the importance of it. Your suggestion promoting a change to our educational training to be licensed is a joke and an insult to every one of the licensed funeral directors in America.

Signed, Perturbed Professor

Dear Perturbed Professor and

Dear Readers,

Other than the signature, which is changed to protect the writer, this is a real, unaltered letter. Well, practically unaltered, as I did edit the grammar and a few spelling mistakes.

This column is about money and management. So why do I invest my time in writing about embalming, other than the guilt the writer placed on me? Let me explain.

In 1984, when the FTC changed the way funeral service had to bill for its services, embalming was a keystone service. In my mind, the chain of consumer decisions is simple. When we stop viewing the body, we stop having visitations. Fewer visitations result in less demand for ornate caskets. If there are no caskets to display the deceased, then we stop having funeral services. The lack of a funeral service means we stop going to the cemetery. Ultimately, the domino effect results in a decline in driving to the bank! A decline in the use of embalming services is a gateway to a loss of profit. Profit is what this column is about.

Professor, I do not want to change the use of embalming – society does. In 1984,

when I was honored to find my way into this profession, almost every body was embalmed. By my estimate, more than 94 percent of all deaths resulted in embalming. Other than the 3 percent that were direct disposal cremations and the 3 percent of Jewish and Muslim faiths, everyone else was embalmed.

Today, I estimate that about 50 percent of all bodies are not embalmed. This is not due to an increase in Jewish and Muslim deaths in the United States but to the public not seeing the economics of the funeral service. That, dear Perturbed Professor, is your fault, not mine. (When I say “you,” I mean funeral service professionals.)

To have a skill of any kind is a chance to provide a service. Whether that skill is cooking, drawing or embalming, we make a living performing that skill only if people feel it is a monetized item. Walk in Ghirardelli Square and you see mimes performing and passing the hat. Only about 1 in 10 people give them a token of payment. That's because 90 percent do not feel it was worth their interest. Today, embalming is unappreciated by about half of the public.

Historically, embalming has been a keystone to this profession. The advances made in embalming 150 years ago brought great comfort to families that brought their loved ones home from Civil War battlefields to be seen and identified one last time. Embalmers worked as freelancers, communicating with families, getting paid in the mail and then shipping embalmed bodies home.

Today, we have a more organized business. Yet I would tell you to look at the website of any funeral home – there is rarely a mention of embalming or the benefits of embalming or the education of the embalmers. There are a few sites that have testimonials, but these rare-

ly mention the presentation of a loved one's body. There are about 21,000 funeral homes, and I have only seen three funeral home websites that talk about the importance of presenting a body and the results of embalming. Professor, if you don't promote it, who will?

I am not against embalming. In the 1980s, I started ranting about how to set prices. I declared from every pulpit that you cannot charge (at that time) only \$100 or \$200 to embalm a body. I equated it to a surgical procedure. If it takes 60 to 90 minutes of a trained embalmer's time, how can you charge so little? My 90-minute dental visit costs two to three times what you charge for embalming.

I have expressed myself clearly for three decades. What other profession is exposed to the bloodborne pathogens to which a qualified embalmer potentially exposes himself or herself? These risks can cause irreconcilable health infection or death. Yet you continue to provide this service for such a modest sum. Is it low self-esteem or because families are not willing to monetize this service?

Professor, I have done my research. When I wrote my book on cremation, I studied the state licensing requirements. At that time, 23 states required a mortuary science student to be licensed as an embalmer and a funeral director under one license, and I found that these states had higher cremation rates than neighboring states that offered two separate licenses. In addition, my hypothesis is that people attracted to the surgical arts of embalming may not be as proficient in the arrangement room. The skills that makes one a good arranger and the skills of a good embalmer are not aligned.

Do not read this as being anti-embalming, Professor. I just think we have to be more sensitive to the needs of the living who are hiring the funeral home.

Some people do not want to gaze upon a dead human body for a day or two. It doesn't make a consumer an insensitive lout if he or she doesn't see the value in your service.

The world is changing. If we want to have a profession, we need to re-examine the tasks of service – from answering the first call until the delivery of the papers after the service. If we are going to promote embalming, then we have to do it in our blogs and on our websites and in our funeral homes as part of explaining the options of service.

Typically, you don't even use the word "embalming." You ask, "Do you want us to prepare the body?" I have been an expert witness in three cases in which the family didn't want the body embalmed. They alleged they told this to the funeral director and yet the body was embalmed. In each case, the family acknowledged that they were asked at some point, "Do you want us to prepare the body?" and answered in the affirmative. They did not realize that the question referred to embalming.

In summary, Perturbed Professor, you

are angry that the world is passing by a skill you are very proud to have. Again, I am not promoting the termination of embalming. For the record, I am in favor of charging for this as a true service of a professional. I am in favor of promoting the benefits of embalming. I want to see testimonials on websites that promote the comfort families have in seeing and saying goodbye to their loved one. I am also in favor of making this a tool of the profession, not a requirement. I am in favor of funeral service attracting people who have solid arranging skills. I am in favor of more personalized services. I am in favor of funeral arrangers and embalmers getting a livable wage by monetizing their skills.

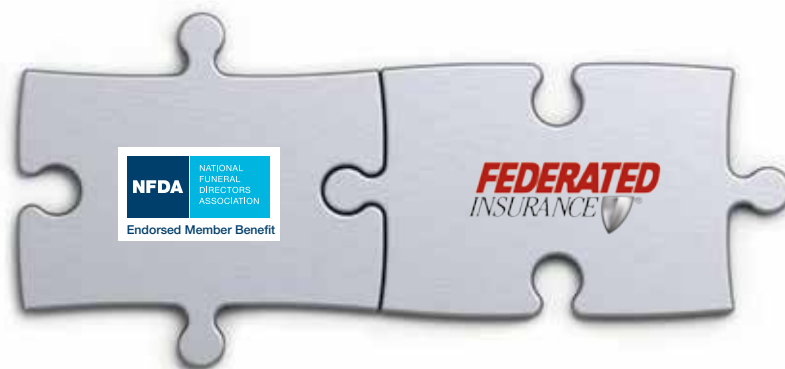
Embalming is declining in the United States and across North America. Just as your colleague, John Chew, who has been studying the nature of mummies for years and has learned some of the secrets of the Egyptians' mummification process, can attest, there was a time when mummification stopped being used for the Egyptian leaders.

If the number of bodies embalmed

each year is declining, that is not anything I am promoting. ★

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A Perfect Fit

Relationships take work. Sometimes things go smoothly, sometimes not so much. But a winning relationship—like the one between Federated and your association—is worth the effort. The result? A solid partnership built on a foundation of mutual respect. That partnership has one primary goal: helping you build the business you imagined.

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