

Migrate, Mutate or Die

A Call to Change the Education of Funeral Directors

Every decade I get motivated to change another dynamic of this profession. In the 1980s, it was eradicating the guarantee from preneed – and in the 1990s, it was to increase the reasonable profit from operating a funeral home. The advent of the 21st century makes me want all funeral homes to employ aftercare and other outreach marketing offerings.

I also have another goal: Changing the educational requirements for licensure of this profession. You might not like what I am about to write here, so if you are happy with this profession having more cynics attacking it, lower profit margins and lower average revenue per call, turn to another article. If you want to join me to oppose these trends, please read on.

Purpose of Education

I will propose to you that there are three reasons to having a minimum education requirement as part the licensure process. These reasons are:

1) **Creating a standard for care within the group of funeral professionals.** The standard of care is a self-fulfilling prophecy. We want all people who serve families, regardless of the state they work in, to have a level of minimum preparedness to deal with consumers.

2) **Limiting who can call themselves a funeral director.** This is a barrier of entry that is intended to both protect the public from unscrupulous individuals and protect the profession from those looking to join the

profession via shortcuts.

3) **The protection of the public and the workers within the profession.** The public needs protecting, as improper disposal has biohazard issues as well as legal issues. The filing of a death certificate is an important legal document. We need to protect those people working within this industry from exposure to contaminants.

I will further propose to you that each of these reasons is somewhat archaic in whole or in part. Since we have 50 states with similar but different licensing requirements for funeral directors, we have a great deal of miscommunication and inefficiency. Each state regulator is omnipotent to enforce the rules of their state. The problem is that many of these rules

exist to promote the three purposes listed, and as such these purposes are not right for the future.

First of all, we have some states that do not require any license to make arrangements and others

where an embalmer and funeral director's license is required. To me, that is akin to insisting that a waiter in a restaurant has to be a chef and a butcher. I apologize to both professions for the choice of analogy.

In Colorado, anyone can make funeral arrangements on behalf of a funeral home, and yet we have more than 20 states that require someone to be licensed as both a funeral director and embalmer to make the same arrangements. I don't get it.

The cremation rate is increasing, and the rate of unembalmed cremated bodies is increasing rapidly, with more funeral homes putting in refrigeration units to hold unembalmed bodies. Therefore, the art of embalming and restoration is being used less and less.



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The art of arranging a funeral is being used 100 percent of the time. Therefore, these two separate skill sets should be recognized for what they are – *different*.

Someone who arranges a funeral needs to have excellent communication skills, people skills and knowledge of the state law. Someone who embalms a body needs to have surgical skill and an understanding of chemistry and biology. These two skill sets are distinctly different. Neither one is more powerful. Embalmers always tell me that the people making arrangements are “getting paid just for talking,” which is not fair. It is also not fair to assume that anyone can make good arrangements.

Funeral arrangers often feel that the embalmer does their work competently, but people don't like to look at a dead body. Frankly, both skill sets are needed. The problem is our mortuary school education is not taking the separate skill sets into consideration. Our laws are not allowing us to have creative communicators in place to interface with consumers when someone must have both licenses to make arrangements.

Retention and Attrition

By us using these laws to limit who can call themselves a funeral director, we are killing the future staffing needs of this business. I have asked the heads of most major mortuary schools to tell me one fact: What is your retention rate of mortuary school graduates at the end of five years from graduation? The question in the inverse is, “What is our attrition rate (those leaving the profession)?” Unfortunately, no one knows the answer. Most people would guess the retention rate is about half of the mortuary school graduates, after five years. These people have an investment of thousands of dollars to get this degree, but many of them simply forgo the investment as they find the work is not what they thought it might be.

I contend that is because if you are

a student who wanted to be an embalmer and you graduate and get hired by a firm needing arrangers, you are not going to be happy. I further contend that if you are a social person and are put in the morgue all day, you are not going to be happy, either. Please don't tell me the solution is to do both – that means that rather than being unhappy 100 percent of the time you are only going to be unhappy 50 percent of the time! That doesn't hinder attrition, either.

By limiting who can be a funeral director, we think we are keeping the high quality of service up in this profession. We aren't. We need people who have administrative talents and are as conversant as those who want to make arrangements. The arrangement meeting is the most important part of the funeral. If an arranger wants to have a solid relationship with the family, that arranger had better be prepared to determine what that family's expectation is. Using creative and insightful memorialization is a big part of the ability for a family to feel good about the amount they spend. If they are not happy, they will vote with their wallet in the future. I think that is what has promoted cremation in the past 20 years. The cookie cutter funeral planning compounded by many ministers who do not provide customized funeral services has led families to say, “If I am going to feel numb after that funeral for \$6,000, then next time I will feel numb for only \$2,000 and cremate.” We need to attract the best and the brightest to funeral service.

I would dare say that our compensation arrangements are impairing our business result. How many people attend classes each year that deal with creative funeral planning? How many of those who attend take it home and put these teachings into effect? In fact, continuing education is maybe the most uncivilized part of gaining national recognition for the consistent application of this profession. About two-thirds of all states have some form

of continuing education. However, that ranges from four hours per year to 12 hours per year. That is not much of a commitment to continuing education, but it is higher than about 15 states that don't have any requirement.

What gives our licensed non-owners their value is not tenure but the ability to generate revenue for their employers. If someone is active in the community and they can attract customers, their value is going to be higher than someone who just serves families that come through the door. In my study of funeral home profitability, the cost of labor is the single largest cost of operations. A well-run funeral home will spend about 26 percent of its revenue on salaries, benefits and payroll taxes for owners and staff. This number can go up as high as 50 percent in some cases. Each funeral director can supervise between \$350,000 and \$450,000 a year in funeral arrangements. Of course, the arranger must make certain that families can afford to pay for what they spend.

I am not saying there will not be dual-licensed people. I expect there will be. I expect it should be by decision based upon the work environment. In many small towns and small businesses, a person may need both licenses, as they will be preparing bodies and meeting with families. That is an economic reality. In some cases, an employee's value may go up by possessing both licenses. It can go up even more if they are making profitable funeral arrangements.

Summary

You don't have to agree with me, just have a position on the purpose of education as part of being licensed in this profession. Come up with your own solutions. Have passion for your position. Then let's see if we can come up with a unified program that will better prepare our people for the future. See if they help your people make arrangements, and study if the averages are going up for these staffers. ❖