



# MY VIEW

## Mortuary School Education

### At the Intersection of Change and Inertia

By Daniel M. Isard

**T**o my critics: I'll start by making your argument for you. I am not a mortuary school graduate. Neither am I a mortuary school dropout. But I have been an observer of this profession for four decades.

As an old man who loves this profession, writing every article as if it is my last (because one of

them will be), I am compelled to explain my thoughts as to how the mortuary education system can be improved. It's as clear to me as the liver spots on my hands, which were not present in 1984 when I came across this profession.

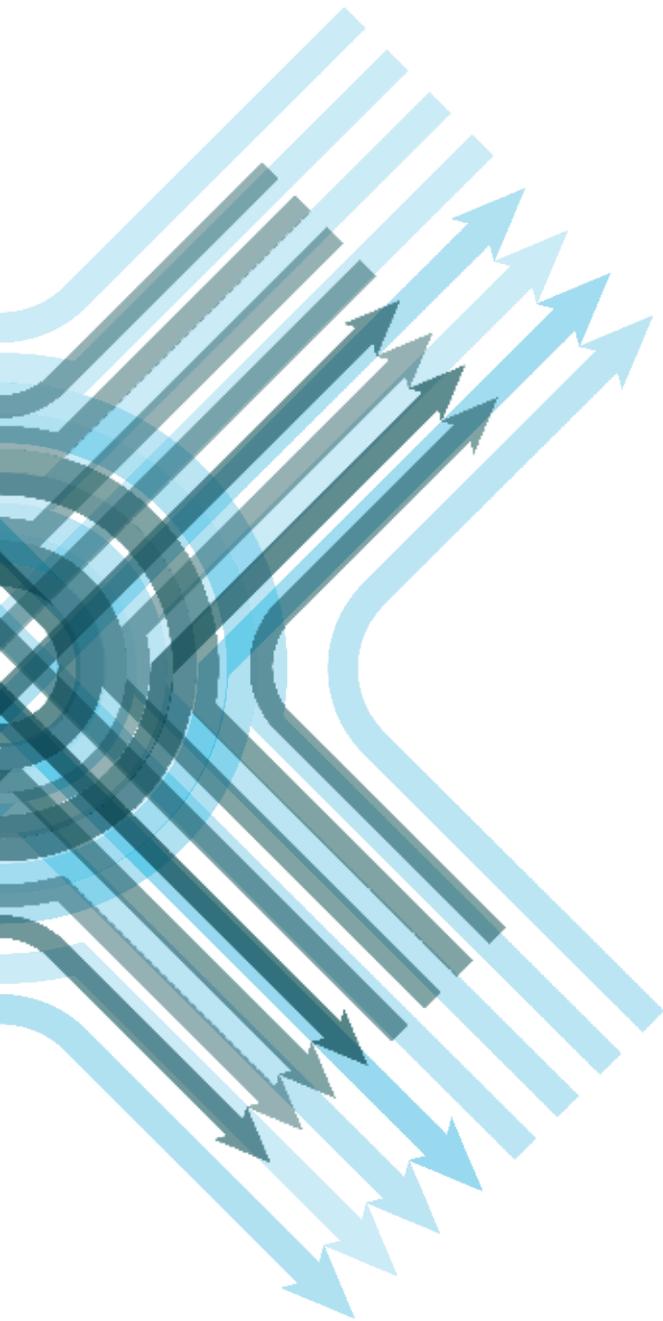
In simple terms, we have a business with an educational agenda predicated on preparing stu-

dents not much differently than it did 50 years ago. But to any observer, no matter how they think, this business barely looks like it did 50 years ago. This, of course, leads to failure. We must prepare people for the needs of this profession in 2020 and beyond, not stay stuck in 1950.

Our consumers still enter into a similar contract,

but while the words may be the same, fulfillment of services is different. Contrasting 1950 funeral service with 2020 funeral service yields a simple, clear understanding:

- Visitations in the past were *at least* one full day and even lasted as many as three days, whereas visitations today are *at most* one day and are in-



creasingly being omitted entirely.

- Previously, the casket was the central focus of the service and the key to pricing; indeed, our entire pricing pre-FTC was a markup on the casket. Today, at 2.8 million deaths per year, we have 1 million more deaths versus 50 years ago, but we sell fewer caskets to-

day than we did 50 years ago.

- In 1970, only 72% of people lived to age 65, whereas today, almost 80% live that long. The construct of a funeral service used to center around mourning; today, 80% of the time, we are “celebrating a life.”
- In 1985, each funeral

home owned, on average, one limo and two hearses. Today, the average funeral home employee can’t spell “limousine.”

Our profession and our lives are evolving, so why is our education system leading to a licensure system that is antiquated?

**T**here have always been two distinct levels of employment in this profession: the professional and the non-professional. Non-professional tasks include working doors, internal administration and assisting with funerals and removals (as allowed by state law). Professional duties include supervising funerals, care and preparation of the body, making arrangements and accountable actions to a regulatory board. My comments here are only intended to address the routine duties that professionals have been entrusted to perform. Twenty-three of the 50 states split the licensure for the professional. Some include embalming and the rest make it two different licenses.

Jobs exist to fill needs. Let’s look at the needs of consumers when the death of a loved one takes place.

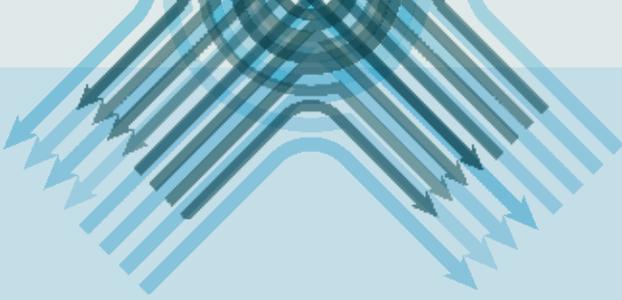
1. Removal of body from place of death is required 100% of the time. In some cases, the body is taken to a hospital for care or pronouncement and then to the funeral home.
2. Preparation of the body.
3. Arranging with a family.

4. Coordinating wake, visitation or calling hours.
5. Coordinating the funeral events; not limited to coordination with the cemetery or crematory.
6. Coordinating the shipping/receiving of a body to/from another city.

Mortuary school exists to prepare students to work independently to meet the above services to families. Students are prepared to work under a more seasoned person as they learn all that is needed to work independently for the funeral home. The bulk of the supervised skilled time and requirements of mortuary school is in helping the students learn how to properly embalm bodies. While more and more often a body is not being embalmed, that is still a key point of our education.

As cremation is increasing as a consumer choice, events of embalming are declining. Many dyed-in-the-wool embalmers are upset by this. I get it. I believe saying goodbye is an important part of starting the grieving process. However, embalming is one skill set and having the ability to influence consumers to have their loved one embalmed is another. We are clearly seeing fewer people embalmed. To many, if a body is to be cremated, there is no need for embalming. But we know embalmed bodies can be cremated. The art of embalming exists to help someone view a loved one before burial, cremation or shipping.

Since embalming is a requirement for licensing in



## Will we rebuild education and licensure to prepare for the future or will we be recalcitrant?

many states but is declining in use, shouldn't we then change that precondition of licensure? About 23 states have a requirement that to be a licensed funeral director, you must be licensed as an embalmer. In other states, it's a two-license procedure.

We still have state laws that are based on funeral services as they were performed decades ago. We are not changing licensure with the times. We require licensed help to do so many things, yet in many states, we have a

great deal of trouble hiring licensed staff. We have episodic periods of negative employment. We have more people retiring and dying each year than we have new licensees to replace them. We don't know the exact number of new graduates who survive more than five years, but most parties with which I have spoken believe the survival rate to be 50% at the end of five years. By my estimate, we lose about 1,750 people a year and replace them with fewer than 750 peo-

ple with five years of experience.

Ironically, cremation is the solution to our labor shortage. An average cremation service often takes about half the man-hours of a casketed service. The key is making sure we have more para-professionals, but most states do not allow para-professionals to do the tasks of licensed staff. We need to get past this issue with the state. We need to ask, as a funeral nation, for these changes to occur in each of our home states.

With that said, we find ourselves at an intersection. Are we going to rebuild education and licensure to prepare for the future or will we be recalcitrant? Are we going to provide licenses so people can focus on front of the house and others on the skills of body prep? After all, the front of the house is where we build market share. Do you want to be an "old" or a "new" funeral home? New is inclusive of all. New is having arrangements that meet the desires of those of the next generations.

When joggers come to an intersection, they stop, look both ways and then elect when to go and at what speed. I hope funeral service looks at the intersection at which we have arrived. I hope we look both ways. I hope we make a decision to embrace the future and not try to restrict it. Our society needs us to make good, practical decisions for the future. ☰

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