

Information on Embalming

Embalming is defined as the preservation of a body from decay, originally with spices and, more recently, through arterial injection of embalming fluid.

Historically, the process is identified with the Egyptians and the mummification of bodies. In fact this complicated and extreme method was abandoned, although in recent centuries ways of preserving bodies has received considerable attention. Varying levels of success were achieved but probably due to expense, they were utilised by very few people.

The current use of the word “embalming” is misleading. The process is generally referred to as hygienic treatment. It is used to improve the visual appearance of the body and to prevent deterioration in the period leading up to the funeral which would make the viewing of the deceased by relatives a less distressing event. It has no long-term preservative value and cannot be compared with the Egyptian concept of preserving bodies.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

The embalming process involves removing the body fluids and replacing them with a solution of formaldehyde, often containing a pink dye. The body fluids are treated and disposed of via the public sewer. The embalming fluid normally consists of a 2% solution of formaldehyde, an irritant, volatile acid.

Those who have concerns that embalming fluid may pollute the environment have a right to stipulate that this is not carried out on their body after death. Similarly, executors or nearest relatives making funeral arrangements can specify that embalming is not carried out on the deceased.

In some burial schemes, such as woodland burial, all chemicals may be prohibited. This restriction may apply to embalming fluid as well as to horticultural chemicals.