

Death and Dying

Death is a cultural as well as a biological event. This includes arrangements for spiritual support. Even people who do not practise any religion may return to the religion of their upbringing when dying.

Health professionals need to be aware of the cultural and religious beliefs of their dying patients and their families.

The behaviours surrounding death are especially robust, and adherence to cultural practice provides grieving families and communities with a script that offers them essential support. The traditional practices for the handling of cadavers and the management of death and burial of the major religions are set out in "A Hospital Handbook on Multiculturalism and Religion". Muslim practices are also outlined in "The Health Care Provider's Handbook on Muslim Patients" (see the **Resources** section).

Traditional practices regarding who should touch the body or move it, what direction the body should face etc. should be acknowledged and respected.

The following points may be useful:

- ◎ It is usually important to involve a priest, rabbi, monk or imam, and this can be arranged through the chaplaincy department. If the patient or family wish, a religious person can provide support or prayers, whether the person is conscious or unconscious.
- ◎ Explain the physiological changes that occur as a result of the dying process. For instance, a dying person's lack of appetite can be distressing to family members to whom it is important to show caring by bringing food.
- ◎ Check with the family first regarding their special needs and how they would like things done when a loved one has died, especially in sudden death.
- ◎ Staff need to know how to look after the grieving family and how to access bereavement groups.



Autopsy

Where relevant, involve the appropriate religious leader if an autopsy is necessary. Autopsies need to be negotiated with Muslims who want to bury their dead early. They may also believe that death is God's will, and there is no need to find a reason. Buddhists generally do not like the skin to be pierced.

