

# Till death do us part

You can't preserve life, but you can preserve the human body. The Gisborne Herald's KRISTINE WALSH wonders what is involved in the process of embalming, and whether it is something we all have to do.

WHEN a Gisborne man recently travelled to the South Island for his mother's funeral, he had to make it snappy. In accordance with her wishes the family had requested that the woman not be embalmed, meaning that she had to be buried quickly.

There's nothing surprising in that — it makes sense that a body that hasn't been preserved should be put to rest with some haste.

What is surprising is how many Kiwis are unaware of their rights when it comes to embalming. Is the procedure required by law? And if not, what are the alternatives?

There are no legal requirements that people be embalmed in New Zealand, says the Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand (FDANZ). It's all to do with their wishes or, if they don't make those known, the wishes of their family.

Gisborne funeral director David Parker says that, in the event of a death, he or one of the other staff at Evans Funeral Services will discuss the option of embalming with family.

They will make a professional recommendation, he says, but in the end it is up to family members.

And it won't be carried out against their wishes. Permission for the go-ahead to embalm is included when they sign the funeral authority form.

But there are things to consider, says Parker, the most important being time — depending on factors like temperature, a body is likely to begin deteriorating soon after death.

In addition, embalming not only preserves bodies, it also helps make them more presentable.

"We do recommend it if people are wanting to view the body, especially if family and friends need to travel from out of town for the funeral, says Parker, who joined the family business over 25 years ago.

"Then there is the cause of death. If the person had an infectious disease, for example, or had died in a manner that made viewing uncomfortable we would suggest it as a sensible option."

There are times when a body doesn't need to be embalmed. If, for example, it is going to be a short time before the funeral and if the body is not going to be viewed.

But if a family does choose to bypass embalming against all professional advice, they will be asked to sign a waiver acknowledging responsibility should there be consequences from the decomposition that will inevitably occur. If, for example, another family member wants to view the



THE LAST GOODBYE: There are many things to consider when making arrangements for the final send-off.

body and doesn't like what they see. Or if there are any health or hygiene issues that arise.

In New Zealand, though, most people do choose embalming for their loved ones. The FDANZ puts the figure at 90 percent but David Parker says that, in Gisborne, that figure is likely to be closer to 95 percent.

Most Maori like to see their whanaunga embalmed, he says, especially if they are going to be lying on a marae where it can be pretty hot, and where there are a lot of mourners around.

In fact, David Parker reckons it is the Maori practice of keeping bodies with the family — a practice he says has increasingly been taken up by non-Maori families — that sees such high rates of embalming in New Zealand as compared to, say, Australia. Over the Tasman, embalming rates are very low, bodies instead being kept under re-refrigeration before being buried or cremated.

Also in Gisborne, he says, there is a "magnificent" palliative care service, the

work of which enables people with terminal illnesses to die in their own homes.

"In most of those cases the families want their loved ones back home with them, where they died, so embalming is appropriate."

It's not illegal to have an unembalmed body at home, he says, but it could be distressing and unpleasant.

"That is especially so here where we have very high humidity, which accelerates the breakdown of the body."

The embalming process itself — which adds about \$495 to the cost of a funeral — takes place in the crisp white and stainless steel room at Evans' Ormond

Road facility.

There, chemicals are lined up on gleaming shelves like a rainbow promising new — or at least the illusion of — life. Among the multi-coloured bottles there is fluid to return colour to a complexion, fluid to plump out cavities, and fluid to stave off dehydration, which is inevitable given the body is over 90 percent water.

The embalmer will make a small incision in an artery of the person being embalmed.

Using a pressurised device, the appropriate chemicals will be pumped into the arterial system, at the same time forcing out the venous (non-oxygenised) blood that causes discolouration.

The choice of which chemicals to use is crucial — the embalmer has to know what they are doing.

And as past president of the New Zealand Embalmers Association, Parker is passionate about making sure they do by bringing more professionalism into an industry which, at the moment, is completely unregulated.

He got to air his concerns a few months ago when invited to appear as a guest on television programme Campbell Live after an Auckland family complained about an embalming that had gone horribly wrong.

It's not a problem here, he says. Evans is the only funeral directors in town, they do their own embalming and staff hold a New Zealand Certificate in Embalming, which they earned by studying everything from chemistry and physiology to anatomy and microbiology.

But in bigger centres like Auckland, many if not most funeral parlours pass that task on to embalming contractors, many of which employ unqualified staff which, to David Parker's horror, is perfectly legal.

"What the NZEA has been trying to do is to get some sort of regulation for the industry," he said.

"There have been a lot of frustrations in trying to get that across to government."

David Parker knows better than most how well the embalming process works. In 1998 he was part of the team charged with exhuming 35 bodies from a Tikitiki cemetery that was being threatened by an encroaching river.

Both embalmed and unembalmed bodies were in the cemetery and the differences, he says, were stark.

One woman had been buried 10 years previously but, due to embalming, was easily recognisable. The unembalmed bodies, however, had broken down within a couple of years after burial.

In the end, though, it's not really about what is going to be happening 10 years after the body has been buried or cremated, he says.

"It's about allowing families to grieve without adding to their distress or exposing them to the risk of disease."

## Going green after death

There is a "natural burial" movement in New Zealand which advocates for burial of unembalmed bodies in shallow plots, using biodegradable caskets covered with compost and over-planted with trees.

The only natural burial cemetery in New Zealand is Waikumete, in West Auckland. However, the FDANZ believes that in the seven years the service has been offered at Waikumete, only three burials have taken place there.

Advocate Mark Blackham says a natural burials cemetery should be in operation in Wellington by Christmas. But while there are "support groups in many towns advocating for natural cemeteries", there is not one in Gisborne.

## Work in industry a privilege, says female funeral director

DAVID Parker says that, of the people graduating with certificates in either embalming or funeral directing in New Zealand in the last three years, over 70 percent have been women.

It's "fantastic" to have a woman's touch, says Parker.

He's no hard man himself — newspaper bereavement notices often refer to his compassion and kindness. But he reckons "they just bring another dimension to the industry".

Evans Funeral Services this year employed its first female funeral director, Kay Paku, who is currently working towards her National

Certificate in Funeral Directing.

Not that she's new to the industry. For more than two years she worked at Evans in an administrative role before making the change.

She says it is a profession that "chose me, rather than me choosing it".

"I was already working at Evans and, when the opportunity came up, it seemed like a natural progression," she said.

"And I love it. I feel it is a real privilege to be able to help people at a time when they really need it."

Training for both the National Certificate in Embalming and the

National Certificate in Funeral Directing is generally done by candidates who are already working in the industry, so study is combined with mentoring and practical experience.

To take part, they need to be aged 20 years or older and have at least one year's industry experience.

Should a student achieve certificates in both embalming and funeral directing, they will be awarded the National Diploma in Funeral Service. The qualifications are overseen by the Funeral Service Training Trust and training is delivered by the Wellington Institute of Technology (WELTEC).

## Ashes awaiting

WALK past the rows and rows of coffins out the back at

Evans Funeral Services and there is another line-up to consider — rows and rows of small white boxes, all bearing the meticulously-printed names of the people within.

That's right, every one of these boxes — around 300 of them — contains the ashes of someone who was cremated but family have not yet collected their remains.

They're safe where they are, says funeral director David Parker. But he'd really rather people took their loved ones home.

## Decision about embalming a personal process

### WHY EMBALM?

■ Sanitation — The body becomes safe for handling and viewing when micro-organisms are made harmless.

■ Preservation — Allowing time for relatives and friends to grieve and say goodbye without facing problems of odour or deterioration.

■ Presentation — Restoring the person's natural appearance, giving mourners a better "memory picture" which they may take comfort from.

### WHY NOT EMBALM

■ If the deceased or family members were opposed to the use of chemicals.

■ If burial or cremation is going to occur quickly, and there is to be little or no viewing, it may not be deemed necessary.

■ Religious reasons. For example, embalming is forbidden among those practising the Baha'i, Zoroastrian, Jewish and Muslim faiths, and is not widely accepted in Hindu communities.

### WHAT IS EMBALMING

An embalmer is likely to give a natural pose to the person's facial features and distribute disinfecting and preserving fluids through the body's arterial system, while simultaneously pushing out the venous (non-oxygenised) blood that causes external discolouration.

Preparation is also likely to include washing, dressing, hairdressing and restoration of natural skin colour.