

De-myth-tifying

Looking after dead people

I'm standing in a room stacked high with 60 to 70 caskets, talking with Nick Evans about embalming the deceased . . . and feeling completely at ease, thanks to his relaxed, warm, matter-of-fact manner.

We are in a large storage facility behind the chapel at Evans Funeral Services where there are traditional shiny wooden caskets, brightly coloured ones and also a trendy new style made from rimu plywood with a curved lid, a design popular in Auckland but one which hasn't caught on in Gisborne yet, says Nick who has been an embalmer for the last 13 years.

The largest casket is 6 foot 6 inches long which only just fits into the hearse and the smallest is tiny, just 16 inches.

Nick embarked on his highly specialised and somewhat unusual profession when he answered an advertisement for an embalmer in The Gisborne Herald in 2003.

"I felt I had the right credentials for the job," says Nick, aged 49. "I had a history of logistics and truck driving including a 10-year stint in the army in New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia and Antarctica, and I had driven ambulances while stationed in Waiouru so I knew I could handle the medical side of the work."

"I was also used to attending car accidents and fatalities and felt I could cope with dealing with the deceased. So I called to see David Parker (now the managing director at Evans), had an interview and got the job."

Nick did 18 months' on-the-job training and an 18-month course with two six-week blocks at WelTech (Wellington Institute of Technology) to become a qualified embalmer.

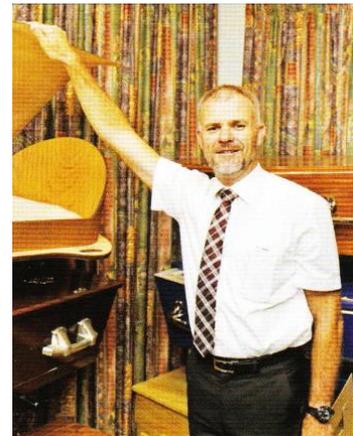
"My job is to sanitise and preserve the body, and present it back to the family," he says. "Embalming the deceased gives families flexibility and options because it allows them the time they need to come to terms with the death and make arrangements for the funeral or tangi."

"It enables the body to lie in a casket on a marae or at home for three days, or stay with us here while relatives travel back to New Zealand from overseas."

The longest time Nick has held a deceased is 29 days.

"But I knew that in advance so I used a long-term embalming process," he says.

Some families choose not to see their loved ones, opting for a straight cremation or burial without embalming.



CARING FOR THE DECEASED: Embalmer Nick Evans opens a rimu plywood casket at Evans Funeral Services. Picture by Liam Clayton

“It’s a very personal choice but I strongly recommend embalming because it enables families, including children, to view their loved one and say a final goodbye. This leaves families with a peaceful, good memory picture of the deceased. It is especially important if there are traumatic memories or circumstances associated with the person’s death,” he says.

Unpredictable nature of job

Nick’s work schedule is, by definition, unpredictable.

“I can never plan my day. The day plans me. I don’t know when the phone is going to ring and where I will need to go. We service a huge area from Hicks Bay to Morere and half way through the Waioeka Gorge.

“But I like the unpredictability of the job. I walk in the door at 7.30am and leave whenever the work is finished. I’m here alone at night at times which I enjoy because there are seldom any interruptions.

“My focus is to get the deceased back to the family in the best possible state and that can sometimes take quite a while, depending on the circumstances of the death. The process takes a minimum of three hours but the outcome is even better if the embalming chemicals are left to work overnight.”

Nick works closely with the four funeral directors at Evans.

“Funeral directors are like event planners with a very short time frame,” he says. “They go to the house, hospital or rest home to collect the deceased and make arrangements to see the family at the home or the office to discuss funeral plans.”

The funeral director passes on important information to the embalmer about the time frame for the funeral, the choice of casket and who is to dress the deceased and in what clothes. Maori families usually want to dress their loved one themselves but if not, it’s part of Nick’s job.

The process of embalming

“The preserving process we use is called arterial embalming which involves injecting a solution into the arteries which then travels through the body and exits through the veins.

“The solution is mainly made up of formaldehyde and glutaraldehyde which kills off the bacteria, firms the tissues and stops decomposition; a humectant which is an internal moisturiser to prevent the skin from drying out; and a high-quality dye to give the skin a pleasant hue.

“We take out as much fluid as possible from the stomach cavity through an incision in the abdomen and inject another chemical to firm up the tissue and dry out the remainder of the natural fluids. This stops putrefaction.

“After the stomach is treated, the body is washed again, the hair is shampooed, the deceased is dressed and make-up applied where required.”

Family members can do the dressing, hair styling and make-up if they wish.

If the deceased has been the victim of an accident, Nick reconstructs the face and straightens and repairs limbs with prosthetics.

Nick’s formal training and practical experience combined with the information on the death certificate influences what ingredients he uses when embalming. The “recipe” differs depending on the cause of death. Renal failure, diabetes, heart failure, various forms of cancers, and HIV Aids all require a different mix of chemicals.

“In the case of a communicable disease, embalming is the only way to ensure the body is safe to handle. In all situations, we use personal protective equipment including face shields.”

Once the embalming process is complete, Nick prepares the casket, lining it with fabric embossed with silver ferns for males and roses for females. He fits the handles and thumb screws, and attaches a rosette, silver fern or crucifix, and a name plate to the lid.

Police or coroner involvement

If the police or the coroner are involved, there can be lengthy delays to a funeral or tangi.

Evans Funeral Services is contracted to supply transport services for the coroner so a team member is required to go to the scene of an accident or sudden death, collect the deceased and deliver the body to an autopsy venue in Palmerston North, Rotorua, Auckland or Hamilton.

Once the pathologist has completed the examination and the deceased is released from coronial care, Nick resumes responsibility for the body. He also operates the crematorium at the cemetery.

“In this district, the percentage of burials to cremations are about 50:50. But the trend is towards cremation due to the higher cost of a cemetery plot, headstone and interment fees. A burial costs about \$2000 and cremation is roughly half that.”

He's heard all the jokes

Nick has a keen sense of humour which helps him cope with the job. He’s heard all the funeral director jokes in the book and has fielded every possible question about his work.

When he tells people what he does for a living the reaction is anything from “Really? How fascinating!” with the questioner typically leaning forward, wide-eyed, waiting to hear all about it, to the exact opposite “Ugh!” with the person recoiling and screwing up his or her nose in distaste.

“But most people genuinely want to know what we do. I’ve been asked if we store bodies and cremate six at a time to which I reply ‘No, you’ve been watching too much telly’.

“And I’m often asked if I have nightmares, but I don’t. I sleep like a baby. And no, I don’t mind working alone at night surrounded by the deceased — in fact I enjoy it because I can get on with the job without interruptions.”

He’s had up to seven bodies in the mortuary at one time but that’s unusual, he says.

What kind of person becomes an embalmer?

So does it take a special kind of person to be an embalmer?

“I’m a practical, hands-on person,” says Nick. “My army training taught me self-discipline and professionalism. You have to remove yourself from the emotional side of the situation and concentrate on the procedure. It’s a clinical job — like a surgeon performing an operation.”

The hardest part of the job is dealing with unnecessary deaths or embalming babies, he says.

“As a father of three, I have to take my daddy hat off and put my embalmer hat on and focus on making the outcome of my work as good as possible for the family.”

Nick is on the executive of the NZ Embalmers’ Association, an organisation which offers excellent peer support to its members, he says.

“I have life-long friends in the association who I can ring any time if I ever need to talk about things.”

That kind of camaraderie and support was invaluable when Nick was one of the disaster response team who assisted in the aftermath of the Christchurch earthquakes five years ago. He worked in the city for seven days and says it took a month to get over the experience.

“But you’ve got to be able to close the door and leave the work behind you at the end of the day. You wouldn’t last in this job otherwise.”

He treats the deceased with tender care as if they were his own family member and takes great pride in his work.

“I know I’ve done a good job when the family of an accident victim, whose face I have reconstructed, say they think their loved one looks so good, he or she could get up and walk away.”

Outside work hours

Outside work hours, Nick’s life revolves around his family.

“I have a very supportive wife, three kids and a granddaughter so life is busy. And I enjoy woodwork too, making furniture. My son Ethan, aged nearly five, is fascinated with my work. When asked what his dad does, he’s very matter-of-fact. ‘My dad looks after people. They’re dead.’ I like his attitude.”

Gisborne-born and raised, Nick’s grandfather and great-grandfather owned Evans Bacon Company. He is no relation of the Evans family who owned Evans Funeral Services from 1947 to 1975 when the Parker family took over the business.

“We have a unique situation in Gisborne because of our isolation. We are a small funeral service in a small city but we see a very wide demographic. We aim to provide a caring service and do everything we can to make the experience as easy as possible for our client families.

“I love my job and enjoy working as part of a team. Embalming is an important and essential role. Without it, the options are limited especially given that many Kiwis travel and live overseas and need time to get home,” he says.

Education is another part of the job.

“There are so many fallacies associated with what happens after a person dies. I see it as part of my role to educate and ‘de-myth-tify’ as many of those myths as I can.”