



Michael Kubasak

## Kubasak's Corner

### The Reluctant Funeral Director: *Inspector, Funeral Director or Both?*

*The other night while I was sleeping, I had a bad dream. In fact, the bad dream was so persistent and real, it woke me up. In so doing, I startled my wife.*

*"What's the matter? Why can't you sleep?" she asked. I told her that it was a bad dream...in my dream there was a voice that was telling me I had to inspect the crematory we use and that for peace of mind, I needed to make sure everything was all right.*

*With all of the recent attention given to the Tri State Crematory and now to the Bayview Crematory, I cannot claim ignorance that crematory inspections should probably be done. Misconduct and wrongdoing at some crematories has made the news, it is on the minds of consumers and I know that some colleagues are conducting inspections. But, I don't have to worry about that.*

*I know my crematory. It is located only a few miles from my funeral home. I have been using it for over 15 years and they have never been accused of any impropriety. Last year I arranged twice as many cremations as the previous year, 30 or so cremations, but this was a fluke. I know the families in my market area and know that cremation won't continue at this pace. I know the owner of the crematory and the entire staff. I play golf with the owner every month; the crematory operator plays on a softball team sponsored by my funeral home. With all of this hullabaloo and hysteria about "this and that" occurring at some crematories, I wonder if I should inspect the crematory owner's golf bag and scorecard, too.*

Requests for cremation continue to increase in practically all areas of the country; more families are requesting more cremation and there is more interest toward cremation than ever before. Most crematories are not owned or operated by funeral homes and most crematories are not located on the premises of a funeral home. Unlike burial or entombment, consumers do not "see" cremation, may not know where the crematory is located and probably does not know who does it.

Not all funeral directors and funeral home staff always react to requests for cremation in a proper manner. Many still resist cremation, treating requests for cremation with indifference, refusing to adapt to the "new consumer" who does not always want burial and a funeral. Some funeral directors maintain an attitude that is nothing short of disdain. After all, funeral directors are trained and skilled in embalming and presenting the body and have a sizeable investment in unique facilities designed and equipped to orchestrate funerals. Sadly, to some unknowledgeable funeral directors, a request for

cremation means no chance to conduct a funeral "my way".

Now, in addition to having to accommodate more requests for cremation, funeral directors are being told to play "policeman" and that they must inspect the crematory. Compounding this, most funeral homes are fighting reduced revenues from doing more cremations and do not get paid for making inspections. At best, many funeral directors view inspections as distracting from their normal duties and an inconvenience.

In speaking to funeral directors across the country, I have identified some reasons why they are reluctant to inspect their outside crematory. They are:

1. **"I have never done an inspection before."** This is a fair statement. The cremation process, the principles of combustion and methods of inspecting a crematory are new to many people in funeral service. Schools of mortuary science generally do not include comprehensive education about cremation as a part of the curriculum. Funeral directors while familiar with most aspects involving burial and entombment are strangely unfamiliar with many elements involving cremation. In polling funeral directors, I can safely say that the majority of funeral directors and those who make cremation arrangements have never witnessed a cremation for themselves or even visited a crematory facility. To do any type of inspection, the "inspector" must possess adequate professional knowledge in knowing what to inspect and how to accomplish it. This is something that must be learned.

2. **"I have never had to do an inspection before."** For certain, times have changed. Thankfully, the horror stories are not rampant throughout the industry, but even one is still too many. The demands on funeral service providers are immense; the accountability bar has been raised. High expectations from customers mean funeral directors cannot take anything for granted. Customers (rightly) expect assurance from their funeral director that cremation, like earth burial, will take place in a timely and respectful manner and that it will be performed without any further need of family involvement or supervision.

3. **"Conducting an inspection is like snooping and means I am questioning the trustworthiness of the crematory."** It is a shame if anyone feels like this. Practically all funeral directors have experienced (and welcome) a client family, member of the clergy, representative of a local hospice organization, stopping by to inspect and see the funeral home facility. An inspection is not a question of trustworthiness. Inspections conducted by funeral directors on their crematory as a part of (sensible) due diligence are not "licensing" inspections but are concerned with delivery of a particular service, provided by the funeral home and sold to consumers on behalf of the decedent. Just as the funeral home strives to conduct their operations in an efficient, effective, professional and respectful manner, which serves to enhance its credibility and reputation, so should the crematory. Generally, most crematories do not receive their business directly from consumers but from funeral homes. Therefore, the funeral home represents the client family who trusts the judgment of the funeral home in

choosing a crematory. In essence, the funeral home is the eyes and ears of the client family and is indebted to them, not to the crematory.

4. **“It is not my job or responsibility to do inspections.”** As some colleagues claim, inspections are or should be the responsibility of a state agency or other licensing bureau. Funeral directors are famous for arguing against government intervention and in so doing, expound the virtue of self-policing throughout the profession and industry. Any claims of self-policing in funeral service must include due diligence crematory inspections by funeral directors. Agreeing to serve a client family means the funeral director becomes their agent, and assumes, among other things, that the crematory is licensed and staffed with qualified personnel who perform cremation only according to industry standards. Some states do not have “cremation laws.” Whether or not a state has any “watchdog” agency overseeing crematories, cremation is too important and too personal of a service to be left to a state inspector. The “special relationship” between funeral director and client family-decedent also means that funeral directors must inspect each outside service providers who is hired by the funeral home in the course of serving a bereaved family. This includes the crematory.

5. **“What do I do with this information and if I find something wrong, who do I complain to?”** Inspections need to be documented in writing and the report retained in a “crematory” file at the funeral home. A copy of the inspection should be provided to the crematory for their records. Anything found wrong or out of the ordinary should be noted on the inspection form. The owner and/or manager of the crematory should be notified immediately. Until the matter has been corrected and written confirmation that corrective action has been taken is received, it may be necessary that the funeral home refrain from using the crematory. If the crematory operates in a state that has a board, compliance or regulatory agency, appropriate notification should be made to them.

This article must not be construed as an indictment against crematories. Most perform their duties admirably. Inspections are one of the primary methods of identifying and eliminating actual as well as potential problems and hazards. Hazards can include problems with equipment, workplace environment, buildings and work practices. Inspections also confirm that controls are effective and operational. Inspections further provide an opportunity to commend workers for a job well done. Inspections can include making recommendations for improvement and provide an opportunity to share best practices. Written inspection reports serve as valuable confirmation of “due diligence” and indicate that the funeral home is taking every precaution to protect its employees and client families. Inspection reports can become a valuable document used in legal proceedings.

Just as funeral directors have learned the nuances of orchestrating services of many different faiths and ethnicities and embalmers have learned the technical skills of restoration and presentation, so must we now all learn to conduct crematory inspections. Inspections are no longer an option. Conducting and documenting an inspection means no lost sleep and no bad dreams in your future. It can mean avoiding litigation and preserving your reputation and livelihood. *Contact Mike Kubasak to schedule his program for your group or association: How To Conduct A Crematory Inspection.*

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