

# INFORMED CHOICES

By Ryan Helfenbein

Out of all the mysteries of the art of undertaking, the one that seems to get the most attention is embalming. It wasn't until the Civil War that embalming was perfected as a method of preservation and since then it has become a standard way to allow relatives, friends and community to witness the reality of a loss. But for some reason there has been a recent push in media reports suggesting that consumers not allow undertakers to perform this sometimes necessary task. There seems to be a false belief that it's "over the top" expensive, not required and the real biggie – not necessary when cremation is selected. With more and more inquiries on this very question, let's explore the topic of embalming and learn why it is still performed today.

First, embalming is nothing like what our Egyptian ancestors performed many moons ago. Today it is a minimally invasive procedure that allows an undertaker to introduce a chemical solution to slow down the natural process that all living organisms undergo when they die. More importantly it is a cleansing process that disinfects the human remains so that anyone can witness in person the reality of the loss. In addition, it is a method to make any cosmetic repairs that might be required to return an individual to a more natural appearance. Embalming is not something that undertakers look forward to doing, rather it is an option available to them in order to provide the best means for close relatives and friends to see a lost loved one a final time in the most natural state possible. Scientifically, it provides a safe memory of the individual because natural bacteria that expedites the biological process is now under

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control and the deceased has been cleansed to provide a safe environment for all who come in contact with them.

Often, families come to the funeral home with questions about why embalming might be necessary, especially those working on a budget. Under Maryland law, a funeral home must use refrigeration or embalming immediately when a decedent comes into their care. The decision of whether or not embalming

should be performed is based on what sorts of services the family plans. For example, if there is not going to be a public viewing, travel over long distances or state lines or if a *green burial* is planned, embalming would not be necessary. However, if there is going to be a viewing, followed by either burial or cremation, embalming is

recommended. So, based on state law alone, if there are to be multiple viewings of the body for the public, the deceased is going to either need to be embalmed or that funeral home is going to need to turn the air conditioning down mighty low.

The question of embalming is a very personal decision and one that should be discussed with an undertaker, in advance when possible. If this decision is being considered, it is best to allow your undertaker to perform the task sooner rather than later, since a much better result can be obtained the more quickly embalming is carried out. If permitted, there is no doubt that embalming will appear as an expense on the statement for funeral services. But by seeking the advice of a professional undertaker, and gaining a clear understanding of why this might be necessary, you can make the best decision about embalming based on what will provide you and your family with the most comforting goodbye.

*Ryan, who is owner, supervising mortician and preplanning counselor at Lasting Tributes on Bestgate Road in Annapolis, offers area residents solutions to high-cost funerals. He can be reached at 410.897.4852 or Ryan@LastingTributesFuneralCare.com*

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