

Care of the Deceased

The process of caring for the deceased during a pandemic is complex, involving a number of individuals, agencies and organizations including medical professionals, hospitals, Office of the Chief Medical Officer of Health, funeral homes, Office of the Chief Coroner, Registrar General of Vital Statistics, religious and cultural organizations and of course the public. Each has a defined role to play in the process, and all will be faced with a number of issues and concerns as they cope with a larger than normal number of deaths.

Each agency or service must identify ways to mitigate this risk to ensure that essential services are carried out. It is imperative therefore that business continuity planning become a key consideration for all.

During a pandemic the process of caring for the deceased remains the same as in the pre-pandemic state with the exception that policies and operational procedures will have to be adapted to the possible risks associated with this process and the new reality of fewer resources during a time of higher mortality.

All stakeholders should be cognizant of their responsibilities respecting a safe work environment as provided for in the *Occupational Health and Safety Act*.

As there may be more individuals who die suddenly and unexpectedly during pandemic, coroners may need to perform more autopsies than in non pandemic times.

Current morgue capacity may be insufficient to meet the needs during a pandemic; therefore, Regional Health Authorities need to plan for additional capacity. These plans need to take into consideration the need to store the deceased in a dignified and secure environment. This may require the development of mutual agreements and protocols between the RHA's and regional coroners who will require bodies to be autopsied to be stored securely.

The following are guidelines for funeral homes' staff and pathologists to protect and prevent the spread of infection.

Handling the deceased

Routine practices, along with additional precautions should be used for handling the deceased, preparing them for autopsy, and transferring them to mortuary services.

Standard Precautions, Contact Precautions, and Airborne Precautions with eye protection (goggles or a face shield) should be followed during autopsy for patients with known or suspected COVID-19 infection. In general, if a death is believed to be due to confirmed COVID-19 infection, there is unlikely to be any need for a post mortem to be conducted.

Mortuary staff

- All staff identified to handle the deceased should be trained in the infection prevention control practice (<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/health-professionals/interim-guidance-acute-healthcare-settings.html>).
- Follow standard precautions including the use of additional PPE if splashing is expected (e.g. disposable gown, face shield or goggles and facemask) during embalming and transfer of a body to a bag.
- Wear disposable nitrile gloves when handling the body bag. Wear heavy-duty gloves over nitrile disposable gloves if there is a risk of cuts, puncture wounds, or other injuries that break the skin.
- Disinfect the outside of the transport bag with an approved product after the body has been bagged.
- Embalming can be conducted.
- Wear appropriate respiratory protection if any procedures will generate aerosols or if required for chemicals used in accordance with the manufacturer's label.
- Bodies with COVID-19 can be buried or cremated. The ash does not pose any risk and can be collected to perform the last rites.

Environmental cleaning and disinfection

- Clean all soiled surfaces before disinfecting, unless the cleaning product states otherwise.
- Disinfect environmental surfaces, instruments and transport trolleys.
- Clean the chamber door, handles and floor after removing the body
- When choosing an environmental cleaning product, it is important to follow product instructions for dilution, contact time and safe use, and to ensure that the product is:
 - Registered in Canada with a Drug Identification Number (DIN)
 - Labelled as a broad-spectrum virucide.
- It is important that facilities that provide funeral services increase the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting of high-touch surfaces to at least twice a day during mass gatherings.

Transportation

- Clean and disinfect the vehicle, after transfer of the deceased
- Use appropriate products as described above.
- The deceased, secured in a body bag, poses no additional risk to the staff transporting it.

Funeral Services:

- Mass Gatherings at the crematorium/ burial ground and reception after the service should be avoided as a social distancing measure.
- There is currently no known risk associated with being in the same room with the body of someone who died of COVID-19.
- A funeral with limited people (no more than 10 people) may be held for a person who has died of COVID-19.
- Social distancing should be maintained, by keeping at least two meters apart.
- For short periods of time when physical distancing is not possible in public settings, wearing a non-medical mask is one way to protect those around you.
- Wearing a non-medical mask (e.g., homemade cloth mask) in the community has not been proven to protect the person wearing it. However, the use of a non-medical mask or facial covering can be an additional measure to protect others around you.
- Symptomatic people, older persons and persons with pre-existing medical conditions should not attend a funeral.
- Funeral homes may consider live streaming services as an option so as to include people while maintaining social distancing.
- If washing the body or shrouding are important religious or cultural practices, families are encouraged to work with their community cultural and religious leaders and funeral home staff on how to reduce their exposure as much as possible. At a minimum, people conducting these activities should wear disposable gloves. If splashing of fluids is expected, additional personal protective equipment (PPE) may be required (such as disposable gown, face shield or goggles and facemask).

Reference:

CDC: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/faq.html>