

Institute of Cemetery & Crematorium Management

The Disposal of Body Parts (Blocks and Slides)

Introduction

In the past the disposal of body parts retained by hospitals has caused widespread media interest and concern. Clearly, whilst we need to be able to provide for the needs of the bereaved and the burial or cremation of body parts and tissue samples, we must meet our statutory duties and responsibilities in terms of environmental and safety issues.

Principles

The high publicity surrounding the Bristol and Liverpool Hospitals has highlighted the sensitivity surrounding the disposal of retained tissue and organs. The families who have suddenly discovered that there are organs and tissues of their loved ones retained in hospital collections are understandably distressed and angry and their expectations of a decent disposal are high.

It is apparent that there is a need to make arrangements for the burial or cremation of blocks and slides. Whilst agreeing to recommend that Burial and Cremation Authorities assist (the Retained Organs Commission as it was) to meet the needs of bereaved parents, who specifically request burial or cremation, we have identified the practical, environmental and legal difficulties involved. We have also made it clear that the disposal of blocks and slides on a large scale is not feasible at crematoria.

Definitions

The term **Body part(s)** refers to either whole or parts of organs or other tissues removed during a post mortem examination and retained after disposal of the body. Guidelines encourage returning such items to the body prior to disposal wherever possible. Most organs or tissues taken during a post mortem examination are stored in a formalin based preservative solution to prevent decay.

Many of the samples taken during the post mortem are used to form **blocks** and **slides**. Small samples are taken and mounted in a block of wax contained on a plastic base. The wax replaces any water in the tissue and therefore makes it hard. Very thin sections of the block can then be cut and mounted on a glass slide for study under a microscope. The sections taken in this manner are about ten times thinner than human hair.

Policy

For the purpose of disposal, it is necessary to distinguish between whole or parts of organs which are not contained on glass slides or in wax blocks, and those that are. For the purpose of this policy, loose body parts are referred to as organs, and tissues on glass slides or in wax blocks are referred to as samples

Cremations

Cremation of organs is acceptable, and may only be carried out in accordance with the Cremation Regulations 2008. The bulk cremation of such organs is acceptable, subject to the necessary documentation prescribed by the above Regulations being received. The costs for carrying out such cremations should be determined locally.

Cremation of samples is only acceptable where the samples in question relate to one deceased individual, and it is the desire of the relatives of the deceased that the samples are cremated. The cremation of such samples may only take place in accordance with the Cremation Regulations 2008. The cost of carrying out such cremations should be determined locally. **Consideration must be given to the handling of glass residues after cremation, and the use of trays is recommended. It is also advisable to consult with cremator manufacturers to ensure the cremations are carried out in the most safe and environmentally friendly way.**

Bulk cremation of samples is not acceptable. It should be made clear to hospital authorities that crematoria cannot accept sample in bulk, and that samples can only be accepted for cremation in accordance with the Cremation Regulations 2008 and subject to the above guidance.

Body parts contained in or on materials not deemed suitable for cremation should not be accepted other than as detailed above for individual cases.

Burials

As yet there has been no amendment to law to allow the burial of body parts, although there have been a number of burials of parts of bodies throughout the country. In most cases, the body parts have been buried in the same grave as the original interment, thereby creating a sense of reuniting the body. For such burials it is necessary to obtain an application for the interment; the permission of the grave owner (if the grave is purchased); confirmation of the registration of the death, and a statement from the pathologist or Coroner's officer that the parts are those of the deceased. Following the burial the original burial records should be amended to show the addition of the body parts and a separate (non-statutory) register of the burial of body parts should also be kept. It should be noted that if the family wishes to open the coffin to insert body parts, an exhumation licence, or faculty, as appropriate, would be necessary.

It is likely that burial authorities will be asked to provide bulk burial for organs, blocks and slides. Glass presents particular hazards therefore it would not be prudent to accept such material for burial unless placed in a protective container. Plastic is non-biodegradable and therefore will not breakdown once buried. Organs not contained in or on glass or plastic may be accepted for burial, and the guidelines established for the burial of foetal remains should be followed.

Future guidance

ICCM Members will be kept informed of any changes to the above policy.

ICCM Advice Line: For further advice and assistance please contact the ICCM National Office on 020 8989 4661.

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