

Policy and Guidance

Open Coffins During Chapel Services

The Institute has received a number of enquiries recently regarding the opening of coffins during chapel services at cemeteries and crematoria. This policy and guidance note is designed to help members meet the needs of the bereaved whilst maintaining a dignified and respectful funeral service.

The Institute believes that a request for a coffin to be open during a chapel service should be granted in order to meet with the personal or cultural needs of the bereaved. It is also believed that we should keep pace with the reasonable, changing wants and needs of the bereaved in order to avoid criticism and complaint.

The simple steps to take on receipt of an initial request for an open coffin at a chapel service are:

- Inform the funeral director that a request for an open coffin should be requested on the preliminary application for cremation or notice of interment, which is signed by the applicant. In the event of a family arranged funeral the request can be dealt with directly.
- Ensure that the request comes from the applicant for the burial or cremation
- The lid is removed in the chapel by the funeral director in full view of the applicant and mourners
- The lid is replaced in the chapel by the funeral director at the end of the service
- If it is likely that the opening and closing of the coffin and mourners filing past it will add to the length of the service, a double service time should be offered via the funeral director at the current fee

The feelings and wellbeing of chapel attendants can be protected if they do not wish to take part or assist in the removal of the lid once the coffin is placed within the chapel. The attendant can assist mourners to their seats and then stand at the back of the chapel whilst the funeral director removes the lid at the start of the service and replaces it at the end.

Objections on the grounds of health and risk of infection are unfounded and will not constitute a reason for refusal. Where the deceased died of a notifiable, infectious disease the precautions commence at the point of death and are designed to protect hospital/mortuary staff, funeral directors staff and cemetery and crematorium personnel. In such cases the funeral director and relatives will be aware that the deceased cannot be exposed. The cemetery, crematorium and funeral director are advised of such cases and hence the coffin cannot be opened in such circumstances.

In cases where a notifiable, infectious disease is not present there is no major risk to funeral directors, mourners or cemetery and crematorium staff. Further information is available from the HSE document 'Risk of Infection from Human Remains' that indicates a low risk.

The opening of a coffin during the chapel service is **not unlawful neither is it contrary to industry codes of practice or guiding principles**. Some faith groups and other groups will attend services in other locations where the coffin lid might be removed. The Institute believes that cemeteries and crematoria should also try to meet this need in their chapels in order to provide the highest level of service to the bereaved.

ICCM – Developing and promoting good practice in cemeteries and crematoria

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