

# Talking about after death practices



A JOINT RESEARCH  
PROJECT BETWEEN  
PORT KEMBLA  
COMMUNITY  
CENTRE AND  
SHELLHARBOUR TAFE  
COMMUNITY SERVICES  
DIPLOMA CLASS 2011

**UNDERSTANDING  
EMERGING SHIFTS IN COMMUNITY  
ATTITUDES, IDEAS AND EXPERIENCES.**

## Acknowledgements

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## Synopsis

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This small study, set mainly in the Illawarra, explores contemporary attitudes and experiences of after death practices. Drawing on conversations with a diverse number of people and groups, it seeks to illuminate how people in our communities feel about their experiences of current practices, including the funeral ceremony, care of the body, choices to do with the casket, the location of the ceremony, etc. The participants in this study have varied experiences in the organisation of a funeral and many have limited experience. Some had been part of an experience that was different to what we might consider a conventional approach to dealing with after death. The study, a collaboration between an alliance of people committed to social and cultural change around after death practices and Shellharbour TAFE Diploma of Community Services students, offers some interesting reflections on what is important to people in how they say goodbye to their loved ones and how we as a community might re-imagine and reclaim the way we “do death”.

Many people at some point in their lives rely on a funeral home to organise a family member or friend’s funeral. Most people will attend a funeral organised by a funeral home. Historically, after death processes such as washing and dressing the deceased and presenting the body for viewing were largely performed in the family home. Death in this context appears to have been more integrated into everyday community life.

Significant social changes have minimised the likelihood of this community approach. Fifty percent of Australian families experienced a bereavement during the Great War. There was also a huge loss of life in the Second World War. Following this war, and perhaps because of it, Australians were encouraged to grieve in private. This trend toward the privatisation of death represented a cultural shift brought about through the impact of war and reinforced by cultural changes that impact people’s expectations and behaviours. Today it is common practice to contact a funeral home to take responsibility for arranging after death processes previously performed at home.

Contemporary community attitudes and experiences of funeral practices remain relatively unexamined in the Australian literature. Australian sociologists have explored the relationship between dominant cultural ideas, identities and after death practices (Charmaz et. al., 1997), but few studies focus on the attitudes and experience of ordinary people about after death processes.

The last twenty years has seen a re-emergence in interest about death and after death practices. This interest has been precipitated by the hospice movement, the HIV-AIDS epidemic, debates about euthanasia, developments

in palliative care, rising suicide rates and new developments in medical technology (Jalland, 2002). This study highlights the need to better understand the role of after death practices in the light of a renewed interest in their importance. The inquiry also suggests the valuable role community conversations play in opening up dialogue about after death practices and in assisting people to get the information they need so that they can have genuine and meaningful involvement in the funeral process.

The study shows that the funeral industry broadly appears to be meeting community needs and expectations. It also shows an openness and interest in further discussing after death options and a need for better information about choices. A strong theme in the study is a perception and attitude of fear and denial of death, a disconnection from death and a lack of knowledge and information about options for dealing with death and after death processes. In this context, research participants appreciate being able to hand the responsibility for these processes to funeral practice experts in the funeral home industry. They also appreciate the opportunity to reflect on what is important to them about these processes and express an interest in a diversity of cultural and community options. These themes are discussed more fully in the findings and discussion sections of the report.

In contrast to the broad appreciation for the role and expertise of the funeral home, a small number of participants in the study also report concern about funeral industry practice. Specific concerns are raised about funeral practitioners not allowing enough time for the service, which sometimes feels rushed. Some respondents feel there isn't enough attention to the representation of the deceased person as a unique individual, particularly in the case of services without traditional religious ceremony. A lack of attention to cultural sensitivity and cultural tradition is another area of concern. Some participants feel that cost of funerals both shape and restrain their ability to express how much the deceased is loved and valued by their family. Concern about the affordability of funerals appears as a strong theme throughout the study.

These themes are discussed more fully in the findings and discussion sections of the report. The study is designed to catch emergent voices. At the same time as appreciating current funeral home services and being glad to refer to their expertise, participants are open and interested in discussing after death practices and options. A strong emergent voice speaks of a definite lack of information and knowledge and this is discussed more fully in the following analysis.

In conclusion, this small study demonstrates the importance of opening up community spaces to talk about after death processes. Whilst conversations about death are perceived by participants in the study to be historically taboo and to be avoided, the study shows a concurrent willingness and desire to

grapple with the issues. Participants express concern about how to do death well and most particularly express a tension between this yearning and financial affordability. They clearly appreciate the opportunity of a space in which to reflect on both experience and expectations and express a definite need for more information about the diversity of death and after death options.

Death comes to us whether we're prepared or not, sometimes stretching the limits of our endurance, refusing to allow us to avoid it, or fix it. (Leimbach, 2009:XI)

The research project team interviewed participants from a diversity of backgrounds and community demographics. The voice of participants in the study is the most vital aspect of the research. Hearing what participants want, what they know or are interested to know about after death practice is the main focus for the research team. Discussing preferences and choices about the arrangement of funerals brought out that there is no right or wrong way to conduct a funeral service, or care for, respect and honour the deceased. This project brings out the voices of participants to say 'this is what we value' about after death practice and 'this is what we think is important'. One of the main strengths of the project is that participants express appreciation for the opportunity to speak about the issues and hopefully this opportunity is empowering for them, if not now, perhaps at a future time should they be involved in organising a funeral for a loved one.

### ***Researcher's Voice***

*As I reflect back on the research project I feel extremely privileged to have been trusted with the deeply personal stories and thoughts of the participants. I admired their courage and appreciated their emotional generosity. The data leads me to think that a cultural shift is happening in the way we think, feel and do after death practice. I feel proud to have been a part of this research. The topic of after death processes is very complex. I hope that this work makes a contribution at a time when the topic is so relevant to our environmentally conscious and culturally diverse society.*

*Through the process of this research project I have been inspired to be brave and look at my own values surrounding after death practices and engage with my family and friends and talk about what's important to them, how would they like to be commemorated or not. How do we want our body taken care of? Who do we want to handle our body? I am now empowered with knowledge in this regard. I feel passionately about opening up the conversation to talk and delve into what others think and feel would be important to them. Personally I think discussing these issues would be valuable for everyone.*

## Introduction

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This appreciative enquiry provides an opportunity to engage with local people about their attitudes and experience of after death and funeral practices. Many people, at some point in their lives rely on a funeral home to organise a funeral. Most will attend a funeral organised by a funeral home. Participants in the study are engaged by the research team in conversations about what they think about after death processes. This report is presented as an appreciative enquiry as participants' views are sought in conversation and discussion about the diversity of approaches to after death practice.

Historically, and in some contemporary cultures care for the deceased is provided in the home by individual families. In Australia, this changed over time to the provision of services by family based funeral parlour businesses. Currently, the community almost singularly relies on the corporate funeral home industry for the provision of funeral services, although more recently small community based services are also emerging. In the context of these developments, the report focuses on the attitudes and experiences of the research participants in the study. It outlines where the funeral industry appears to be meeting community needs, as well as highlighting areas of concern and interest in different sorts of after death practice.

## Rationale for the project

Against a background of increased concentration of funeral home ownership and vertical integration, a number of small initiatives are responding to a call for different types of funeral and after death practices. The Natural Death Centre in Lismore, Life Rights and Groundswell projects in Sydney provide natural approaches to death.

These services provide information, referral and assistance with different types of after death services. They aim to empower people with knowledge about choices regarding natural funeral and burial options. In early 2011, a loose alliance formed between these services. One of the organisations in this alliance is a local Illawarra community service, the Port Kembla Community Centre. The Centre has many roles in the local community. In order to assess community attitudes and needs in regard to after death practice, the Centre approached Shellharbour TAFE Community Services section to initiate an investigative study into community attitudes and experiences of funeral practice and after death processes.

## **Aims of the research study**

The study aims to document conversational findings about research participants' attitudes and experiences of after death processes. The project investigates community expectations about funeral processes and ascertains what is of most value for research participants. It aims to investigate participants' understanding about their options in relation to the funeral of a loved one.

The study seeks to contribute to the conversation about quality support when someone has the challenging task of arranging a funeral. The research aims to highlight issues and recommendations in relation to after death practices. In conclusion, the research aims to capture trends in cultural and community practice to do with after death options.

## **Stakeholders**

The key stakeholders in this research project include the Port Kembla Community Centre, representatives of the natural death movement alliance and 2011 Diploma students at Shellharbour TAFE Community Service section.

## **Research methodology**

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### **Overview**

The research team takes an Appreciative Inquiry approach as a means of focussing the study. We have engaged in a conversational style with people in the Illawarra area, primarily seeking information about participants' attitudes, experience and understanding of after death and funeral practices. We seek to facilitate their vision of what the ideal funeral might look like for them and how we as a community might innovate or re-imagine how we as a community commemorate a loved one after death.

A Participatory Action Research (PAR) framework is used to actively involve participants in the research process and collect the qualitative data used in the study. The research involved the collection of data from community members of all ages. The research team also review relevant journal articles and publications. Our research process consists of cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2001).

The specific data collection methods are:

- Semi-structured interviews with community members who have experience of arranging a funeral and those with no experience of arranging a funeral. These interviews were mainly conducted face to face and some were conducted by telephone.
- Group interviews were also conducted with community members
- An on line survey was conducted.
- Literature was reviewed from journals, on-line papers, books, legislative documents and web based resources.
- Interpretive focus groups and meetings were held with key stakeholders,
- And reflective discussions were regularly held within the TAFE research team.

### **Negotiating Entry**

The research team contacted local community organisations to recruit participants for the study. The team recruited participants from Shellharbour College of TAFE and also used the stakeholder's networks to request the recruitment of participants. A list of recruits was established and members of the research team contacted these participants to arrange suitable times and locations to conduct the interview. Some of the participants were interviewed by telephone. In these cases the participant's information sheets were given to them prior to the interview. With the focus groups, the research team arranged a time with the organisation once permission from the members of the group had been granted.

A participant information sheet was given to each research participant prior to each interview. This information sheet explained the research project and outlined the interview process. The information presented on the sheet was discussed with each participant before they were asked to sign a consent form, after agreeing to participate in the study.

## **Data gathering methods**

The study incorporated multiple methods of gathering a variety of sources of qualitative data within each of the action research cycles.

### ***Semi Structured Interviews and group interviews***

From May to September 2011 a total of 37 semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout the Illawarra. Interviews were conducted face to face or by telephone. Twelve (12) group interviews were also conducted, with an average of five (5) to fifteen (15) participants in each group. One hundred and fourteen (114) people participated in either an individual or group interview.

Semi-structured interviews provide participants with the opportunity to freely speak of their experience whilst the interviewer actively listens. Individual and group interviews were digitally recorded and with the consent of the research participants transcribed verbatim. The research team constructed several types of questions for use in the semi-structured interviews prior to interviewing the participants. Evaluative and speculative questions were developed to assist the participants in telling their story. These types of questions enabled us to gather a wide range of rich data. The transcripts of the digital recordings enabled both participants and researchers to check the interviews and were also used for reflective discussion between researchers and the reference group.

### **Demographic information for interviews**

The research team interviewed both male and female participants. However, the majority of participants interviewed were female. Participants varied in ages from eighteen (18) years to fifty-nine (59). Participants are from a diversity of cultural backgrounds including Samoan, Pilipino, Macedonian, Italian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Liberian, Columbian. We also interviewed a number of Aboriginal participants. Participants come from a wide range of local postcodes in the Illawarra.

### ***On Line Survey and Demographic Information***

The research team developed an on-line survey to collect data from individuals who are unable to participate in face-to-face interviews. The survey was open for seven weeks. One hundred and eighty eight (188) people completed the survey. Of those participants, forty-two (42) are male and one hundred and forty-five (145) are female. Ages range from eighteen

(18) years to over sixty (60) years with the majority of participants in the age range between thirty (30) and fifty-nine (59) years. 65.9% of respondents have a tertiary qualification, 24.7% have a vocational qualification and 9.3% have a secondary qualification only. Respondents predominately identified as Australian and a small number are from a wide diversity of cultural backgrounds.

### **Quality and validity in the research**

Various methods are used in the research to ensure the validity, integrity and reliability of the fieldwork data. The team used information sheets and consent forms to ensure that the participants understood the process. All information is treated as confidential and to protect anonymity all data is de-identified. Only the research team has access to the raw data.

All written data has been kept in its original form. Interviews and interpretive focus groups were digitally recorded and then transcribed verbatim. These data management and recording processes enhance the dependability of the research and enable others within the research team to review the findings.

### **Limitations of the research**

It is important to acknowledge that there are a number of limitations that may have some effect on this small qualitative research study. Firstly the study sample is small. The research team endeavoured to ensure participants reflect the demographic diversity in the Illawarra community, however the majority voice is female and more representative of the age bracket between thirty and fifty years. The study does not reflect strongly the voice of men nor younger people. The study combines the use of appreciative inquiry research tools within an action research framework and therefore the data is the product of the conversations that emerged from this inquiry.

The survey was distributed using both stakeholder networks and research team networks. This may have some implications for the findings of the study as some respondents of the survey may already have views influenced by the stakeholders of this research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

All participants in the study contributed voluntarily. Voluntary participation ensures that participation in the study is free from bias or coercion. Participants are free to withdraw their participation at any time. The research team are aware that the study is focused on sensitive issues regarding participant experience and that it may cause distress. The few participants for whom this is the case were reassured that they were able to stop the interview at any time. At the conclusion of the interview the research team checked how participants were feeling and offered to get in touch with support if required. This was not required by any of the participants. The research team

developed a handout with general information and links to on-line information for participants interested in finding out more.

Confidentiality is emphasised throughout. This means that any identifying information or data is not available to, or accessed by anyone other than the research team. Confidentiality also means that any information that might identify a participant is excluded from any published material.

All written data has been kept in its original form. Some of the individual and group interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Others were kept as audio files. All data is kept in a safe place and data management processes are in place to protect participant confidentiality. These data management and recording processes enhance the dependability of the research and enable others within the research team to review the findings.

### **Data analysis and interpretive focus groups**

The research team analysed the data using a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The team read the individual pieces of data looking for patterns, themes, discrepancies and metaphors and recorded these findings in notebooks. The research team then came together and compared their reading of the data and agreed on a set of themes and a coding protocol (Hessebiber and Leavy, 2006). The team then returned to the data and coded the transcripts.

After the individual and group interviews were completed, a sense-making session was conducted with the reference groups. Our sense-making discussions are influenced by Dodson and Schmalzbauers' (2005) method of interpretive focus group (IFG) that seeks '*to keep local knowledge and the research participants voices and views of the world at the centre of the analysis*' (Dodson, et al 2007:822).

In the following section, having outlined the research questions and the methods used in the PAR cycles, the team presents a review of the literature. The review identifies related research into funeral and after death practices. The team then present an analysis of the fieldwork data and finally discuss the findings in the context of the literature and suggest recommendations informed by the research.

## Literature Review

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In this section we review the national and international literature on after death practices. The literature highlights the following themes:

- An Australian historical and cultural tendency of fear and denial of death and how this potentially contributes a heightened vulnerability for the mourner.
- The institutionalisation and medicalisation of after death processes and the resultant social disconnection from death.
- The role of funeral practices, particularly ceremony, as a facilitative tool in the process of grief and loss after death.
- An escalating commercialisation and increasing cost of after death processes.
- A call for more consumer information regarding after death options and in particular responsive developments to cultural and community needs.
- Social enterprise development.

The Australian literature shows an historical and cultural tendency toward a fear and denial of death. Many participants in the study spoke of an attitude of fear, denial and avoidance of the subject of death. This tendency can be located in the literature on attitudes to death throughout Australian history. In her work on death and dying in twentieth century Australia, Jalland explains that one outcome of Australia's involvement in both world wars is a cultural avoidance of the topic of death (Jalland, 2007). Mourners were encouraged to move on from thoughts and feelings about death. Many families held memorial services to commemorate their loved ones in the absence of their bodies, as they had died overseas. In this context, ceremonious ritual is minimised, death becomes more privatised and denial of death is reinforced.

Official statistics show that one in five Australians who volunteered to fight in the Great War is buried on foreign soil. Sixty thousand veterans were killed within four years of volunteering. The location of approximately 25,000 graves remains unknown to their families and friends. It is estimated that bereavement touched every second Australian family (Warren, 2007 cited in Jalland 2006). Historically we can track the influence of the two world wars on the cultural trend of fear, avoidance and denial of death (Jalland, 2007).

This context of fear and avoidance potentially contributes a heightened vulnerability for the mourner. The NSW Council of Social Service submission to the Legislative Council Social Issues Inquiry (2005) into funeral practices notes that funerals are an essential service. Family and friends of the deceased

are typically in a vulnerable position. The cultural trend of fear, avoidance and denial of death presents a stage upon which the funeral industry has increased its concentration of ownership and vertical integration, resulting in issues of affordability for everyday funerals. The NSW Council of Social Service (NCOSS) is concerned that the excessive price of funerals is putting financial pressure on people at a time when they are vulnerable. The price of funerals trebled in the decade between 1992 and 2002. It also shows that a large section of the Australian funeral industry is owned by 'InvoCare', an international corporation that uses several different local trading names. The submission describes a concern regarding the inadequacy of pricing information available to the public and an increasing need to further educate consumers about products and choices available to them. The submission also explains the need to continue providing culturally specific and appropriate funeral services to those from different ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds (NCOSS, 2005).

The neglect of culturally specific after death services may be attributed to the institutionalisation of after death practice. This has been compounded by the 'medicalisation' of end of life processes. The resultant social disconnection from death is well examined in the literature (Jalland, 2007). The second half of the twentieth century is characterised by developments in medical technology and improved life expectancy. This led to a social reliance on medicine as a means of postponing and eluding the inevitability of death. From the mid twentieth century a new way of dying is described in the literature as 'medicalised dying' (Howarth, 2007).

Howarth referring to Illich (1976), identifies the role medicalisation plays in construing death as a failure of medicine and thus dehumanising dying (2007). When faced with the prospect of death, many patients choose to suffer indignities associated with new technology that may or may not prolong their life. Illich asserts that medicalisation has disempowered the dying. Maintaining the illusion of a last minute recovery reinforces the denial of death and possibly limits the dying person's time to prepare. Sometimes the terminally ill go to hospital with an expectation that technology will save them. Drawing on sociologists Glaser and Strauss, Howarth (2007) characterises modern death and dying as a resounding conspiracy of silence in which the dying, their family members and professionals may suppress even mentioning the subject of death.

Psychologists and sociologists argue that death has become the final 'taboo' and that modern western societies are 'death denying'. Traditional societies rely on religion to shelter against death. Modern societies are more constructed around death avoidance. Howarth (2007) demonstrates, drawing on the work of Berger, how the medicalisation of dying contributes to the privatisation of death as medicalisation means it happens in hospitals away from public view.

The literature links the public role of funeral practices, particularly the funeral ceremony as a comfort and closure process for the bereaved. Funeral services potentially provide a bridge for the bereaved between their former experience of life with their loved one and the reality of now living without them. The literature suggests that shifting cultural norms and practices may be reducing the effectiveness of funerals in achieving this transition. For example, the families' former role of preparing the body is associated in the literature with the process of completion, acceptance and a real sense of the deceased being released from the body (Bryer, 1977 cited in Howarth, 2007). Rapid socio-technological change has reduced intergenerational consensus about the value and effectiveness of the funeral process (Howarth, 2007). The current practice of purchasing a funeral package in advance contributes to what is named in the literature as an escalating commercialisation of after death processes (WA Government Inquiry, 2007).

Perhaps the first step in this commercialisation of after death processes originates in the development of embalming technology. Embalming began in the American Civil War so as to preserve the war dead for their long journey home. The technology quickly spread to Australia (Walter, 2005). By the end of the nineteenth century, developments in embalming techniques enabled the body of the deceased to be removed from the home to the undertaker's premises. Walter drawing on the work of Mitford explains how the undertaker was in full control of the body and hence his role changed to that of funeral director (Walter, 2005).

This change was particularly gendered. Whilst women formerly washed, tended and prepared the body for the funeral, this role was now taken over by male funeral directors (Walter, 2005). Walter drawing on Mitford's work says that the shift in control of the deceased body away from women to men was facilitative of the commercial development of the industry (Walter, 2005). Paraphernalia was used to enhance the display of the deceased body and this was central in the development of the commercialisation of the twentieth century funeral industry (Walter, 2005).

The same period in the history of the North American funeral industry, saw the beginning of product differentiation. Funeral parlours portrayed cremation as an unattractive option. Some religious beliefs prohibited cremation. Cremation did not involve a public viewing or an elaborate casket, both of which were central to the funeral industry's profitability (Walter, 2005). By portraying cremation as tawdry, un-Christian and un-American, funeral directors were highly successful in resisting this cheaper type of funeral. This changed in the 1990s as families more frequently asked for cremation. Funeral directors began offering a viewing and a religious service prior to the cremation and an expensive urn or container for the ashes, or a small box and plaque in a cremation wall (Walter, 2005). The escalating commercialisation of funeral practices is marked by a specialisation of funeral

products geared to current market differentiation trends.

The NSW Council of Social Service submission to the Legislation Council Inquiry into Funeral Practices (2005) examines this commercialisation. It asserts that funeral directors may use hard sell tactics on vulnerable people to promote more expensive coffins and memorial items that the bereaved may not be able to afford. Larger coffins require more grave-digging, which adds to the cost of the funeral (NCOSS, 2005).

As part of the Review of the NSW funeral industry a consumer telephone hotline and on-line survey of funeral consumers was established. The results show that pressure selling, especially with regard to upgrading of coffins and the disposal of ashes may be a significant issue (Legislative Council, 2005).

The literature extensively describes the class-based nature regarding the affordability of after death services. Banks (1998) provides an in depth study into the competition between large corporations and small independent funeral services for the various aspects of death-care. Whilst increased commercial competition should theoretically improve the affordability of funerals the large corporate players appear to have gained some measure of monopoly (Larkin, 2007). The industry is characterised by escalating commercialisation and affordability issues. In contrast, compared to the thousands of dollars for a funeral organised by a funeral home, the Standing Committee on Social Issues was informed that a 'do-it-yourself' funeral could cost as little as nine hundred dollars ((Legislative Council, 2005).

The escalating commercialisation and increased cost of funerals is comprehensively examined and described in the literature as a class based issue (Howarth, 2001). The research literature presents a consumer call for more information regarding a range of issues associated with after death practice including the cost of after death options.

There have been a number of other state based inquiries into the funeral industry in Australia as well. The West Australian Government Inquiry into the Funeral Industry (2007) found that payments towards prepaid funeral funds were being invested in the name of the funeral home, rather than the consumer and that prepaid funeral fund contracts were being set up with a number of flaws. Firstly, they found that there was insufficient detail regarding what services were being purchased. Secondly, they note that contracts did not include provisions for late payment or missed instalments. Thirdly, some contracts contained unfair provisions relating to the cancellation of contracts and that there was an absence of a cooling-off period for some prepaid funeral contracts. They also noted that high-pressure sales tactics were sometimes used to persuade the bereaved to pay for services that were not requested in the original contract (Department of Consumer and Employment Protection, 2007).

The literature also notes an emerging openness to discussion and an interest in finding out more about community and culturally diverse options and trends (Leimbach, et. al, 2009). There is a raft of international literature that discusses the diversity of death rituals and practices across different societies. These can be categorised under three types of organisational umbrellas. They include commercial enterprises, religious enterprises and municipal or community based enterprises (Walter, 2005).

The non-traditional municipal or community based funeral aims to extend the range of preferences about the elements of after death practice, particularly in regard to ceremony (Larkin, 2007). These include elements such as a more personalised ceremony, contributions from multiple loved ones, memorial readings and eulogies and music that is special to the particular people involved (Natural Death Centre, 2005). There is a growing post-modern tendency toward a more personal approach, tailored to specific individual wishes (Howarth, 2007). New partnerships are developing between funeral practitioners who wish to present a more personalised and natural funeral option and those families who are aware of these choices (Natural Death Centre, 2011).

The literature speaks of a growing determination by the community to access after death processes that more fully represent their loved one's way of life (Larkin, 2007). The literature notes this as a common trend across many societies. There is a global demand for more freedom and individuality in funeral practices. This is giving rise to reform movements such as the natural death movement. The literature describes a growing global openness to discussion and interest in finding out more about the diversity of after death options (Leimbach, et. al., 2009).

An example of a service that seeks to meet these needs is The Natural Death Centre. A non-profit association located in northern NSW, the Centre identifies itself as part of this global trend. The service aims to demystify and reclaim after death practices. Part of a growing movement of individuals and organisations, they are working for a more natural and empowering approach to death, dying and the disposal of the human body after death (Natural Death Centre, 2011).

This organisation aims to assist people to take a more natural approach to after death practice. They seek to expose and dispel myths about death and dying and provide information about after death options. They offer advice and referral, community education and body preparation strategies. Just the existence of this service opens a dialogue in the community. Essentially they offer assistance to achieve a more beneficial funeral experience, support those

who wish to conduct a more personal ceremony and encourage people who want to be more pro-active regarding how death and death practices happen. The movement asserts that over the course of the last century, death has become the domain of an exponentially expanded funeral industry. The Natural Death Centre asserts that the industry's death practices are often 'shrouded in secrecy' (The Natural Death Centre website). They acknowledge that '*some people are quite satisfied with the status quo of the funeral industry*' and that there are others who are seeking change (The Natural Death Centre, 2011).

Many people have begun to have more understanding and involvement in the processes of dying, death and disposal... Just as many people have chosen a more natural lifestyle, they also choose to have a more natural death style (The Natural Death Centre, 2011).

The centre provides guidance about building a coffin, dealing with ashes, conducting a burial on private ground, identifying possible locations for funeral ceremonies, assistance regarding the death of a child, information on natural burial grounds and memorial groves (Natural Death Centre, 2011).

The literature broadly locates this community movement's push for more diversity in after death practice, within the diverse range of culturally specific natural death practices. There is a multitude of ways in which death is done across different cultural contexts. The chance to sit with the body of a deceased loved one at home has been part of Maori and Samoan practice for thousands of years (Leimbach, et. al., 2009).

Maori traditionally keep the body at home for up to three days as an important expression of honouring the deceased and expressing community grief. The Maori idea of celebrating the deceased person's life with the whole community reflects a social acceptance of mortality. This process is described in the literature as having a profound effect on all present (Leimbach, et. al., 2009). Ireland is also described in the literature as having similar practice. The idea of a 'wake' originated in Ireland. Traditionally, family and friends literally 'stay awake' to protect the body and keep a vigil before it is taken to the church for the funeral (Leimbach, et. al., 2009).

Howarth (2007) notes the diversity of after death practices in neighbouring countries. There is global interest to study differences in death practices and explore their relationship with wider cultural differences (Howarth, 2007). Walter (2005) drawing on the work of Wikans, Rosenblatt & Firth, notes that despite having the same religion, different cultures may have very different death practices. He also reports that the funeral customs of Presbyterians in Scotland differ markedly from those in the USA. Muslim after death practices in Egypt are very different from those of Muslims in Bali. Cultural,

institutional and religious differences contribute to a large array of practices (Walter, 2005). There are a number of studies about religious and ethnic variations in after death practices in modern societies. He also looks at Hindu after death practices in England and reports on after death practices for British expatriates in Spain (Walter, 2005). Jonker (1996) examines Muslim practices in Berlin. These studies focus on the needs of expatriate or immigrant communities. In part, these studies are motivated by the need for health professionals and funeral practitioners to become more knowledgeable about the post mortem and after death requirements of different communities.

Responsibility for after death practices is shared across a range of institutions. Since the belief in an afterlife is central to Christian theology, care of the dead is a key responsibility of the Christian church. Some countries transfer the responsibility for after death practice to local or state authorities. Mortuary practice alone is quite varied across different cultures and societies (Howarth 2007). Several scholars see the hiring of professionals to deliver death practices in the context of private enterprise as a typically modern denial of death (Larkin, 2007). Other international studies show changing trends in traditional religious rituals to accommodate a more contemporary approach. In contrast, some Churches are legislating to preserve strongly religious and more impersonal rituals (Howarth, 2007).

In the last two decades the Netherlands has seen an increase in informal, more personalised death practices (Walter 2005). Howarth (2007) drawing on Aries' work notes that after death practices in traditional societies occur in the community and conform to religious practice. Walter (1991) talks of death being dominated or controlled by the medical profession. This is in contrast to Howarth's discussion of Field's view that considers postmodern death is a matter of personal choice and people don't feel ruled by religion or medicine (Howarth, 2007). The interactional approach (a perspective of postmodernism) to death and dying focuses on the way individuals make sense of illness, death and dying. From this perspective it is the individual who shapes and defines death practice behaviour, particularly when individuals join together to collectively change practice as has happened at various historical points (Howarth 2007)

An example of this is the death awareness movement, which is again gaining momentum in Australia (Jalland, 2007). Originating at a seminal conference held in Melbourne at St Vincent's hospital in 1971, the conference encouraged 'more open and informed responses to death and grief, both in hospitals and in the general community' (Jalland, 2007 pp. 204-5). According to the literature, the death awareness movement is contributing to a shift in Australian thinking about death and after death practice. In conjunction with the natural death movement, these social change agents present a challenge to conventional after death practices and the institutionalisation of death and

after death care by the medical and funeral industry. The natural death movement is a social movement that asserts that we need to educate the community about the diversity of options and for those who want it, return after death care back to the family and community (Larkin, 2009).

Out of this concern has come the establishment of the social enterprise, offering communities a different approach to doing death. Social enterprise is defined as a business with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are principally reinvested for that purpose in the business or in the community, rather than being driven by the need to maximise profit for shareholders or owners (Varbanova, 2009). Social entrepreneurs are visionaries who use their business and/or marketing skills to better a community through social objectives. They have an impact because they collaborate globally by investing time and creativity to change policies, legislation and frameworks. Varbanova (2009) quotes Bill Drayton, the founder of social enterprise Ashoka as stating:

Everyone is a change maker. Social entrepreneurs are critical in this change, they have vision and they have a big impact (Varbanova 2009:6).

Many social enterprises are emerging into the business world globally. This is due to people realising that there is much hardship and inequality in society and to improve those situations, change is needed. Giving something back to the community that is beneficial is becoming more common place and this practice will continue to grow in the future.

## Findings and analysis of themes

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In this section we discuss participants' perspectives and personal experiences with after death and funeral practices. We begin by discussing a common theme that emerges from our conversations with research participants, namely, the prevailing attitudes to after death and funeral practices, including the fear and denial that surrounds death and the norms around grief. Then we consider the value and meaning that participants find or predict they would find in various funeral practices. Next, we discuss the impact of the cost and where they would stand financially if they had to organise a funeral. Following this we discuss issues relating to the diversity of practices surrounding death reflecting the cultural diversity within the community we study. Finally we explore the knowledge and experiences in the community about natural options and convey through participants conversations responses to doing death differently.

### Prevailing attitudes to after death and funeral practices

#### Fear and Denial of Death in Society

Participants in our study demonstrate a diversity of opinions when it comes to attitudes about end of life and funeral practices. A strong and recurrent theme is that our western industrial society fears and denies death. One participant puts it this way:

*I think death is not talked about enough in our society /culture It's kind of kept hidden from our lives ....we separate so much from the idea of death that often when we unexpectedly experience the death of someone close we find ourselves unprepared for the process that follows and must make important personal decisions when not in the best emotional state to do so...decisions that could have been talked about and agreed upon earlier...our culture also seems to have restricted its funeral options to either the conventional burial or cremation...I'm not really aware of others ...there should be more options*

Many participants speak about a sense of disconnection from death. As a community we disconnect and distance ourselves from death and this disconnection is now embedded into our funeral practices. The following comment expresses this view:

*I don't think we deal with funerals well at all I think we are very removed from the whole process and are therefore subjected to a totally artificial "theatrical" experience rather than something real*

The study finds this sense of disconnection is reflected in a range of ways. As one participant says, death is a 'taboo' subject. To keep it that way it is confined to a particular time and place:

*Death is still considered taboo and people do not openly speak about their feelings especially in the work place. Time is given to the family member, a total of three days to deal with the death, attend the funeral and get over it. No support (is) given in the work place.*

One of the strong findings of this study is that death is held at "arms-length" in western society. The process of distancing ourselves from death results in a limited range of choice about how we 'do' death, and a loss of control over the process. This is highlighted in the following quote from a participant:

*we are in cultural denial about it .We think we have to spend a huge amount so experts can do it for us. At a very vulnerable time, we hand over a lot of money and control to strangers*

How you farewell a loved one is considered a very important part of the grieving process. Many participants convey that, at the time you are faced with the responsibility of organising a funeral you are also blinded by emotion-all you want is to give them the best send off you can regardless of the cost. Other participants feel it is because of how society practises death and an associated view of the funeral as having value based on the price tag.

*Look at the old cowboy films, you got stuck up on boot hill and you had a few rocks put on top of you. I think people are too materialistic about it and it's all a big show and as I said the one person that you're supposed to be doing it all for is dead.*

Death is most often a time of great sadness. It is also provocative, arousing strong emotional responses to the uncertainties of life. The following comment captures this sense of discomfort about our own mortality that a funeral can represent:

*I believe there is a great fear of dying and death and that people have 'real' fears of their own mortality when attending a funeral. It generally holds great sadness for those acquainted with the person dying/dead and very rarely celebrated as an ending to a 'great' life.*

When respondents are asked whether they had ever thought about prearranging their own funeral, 107 of the 184 respondents reply that they had not. When asked, the most common reason is that they want to leave it to family and friends or feel that it is not something they would think about until they were much older. This reluctance to think about and prearrange a funeral may in fact reflect the prevailing attitude of fear and denial of death. Closely linked with this fear and denial of death are the cultural norms around dealing with grief that often require us to move on quickly and to refrain from expressing grief in any public or long term way. This issue is discussed in the following section.

## **The norms around grief**

Any discussion of death raises the issue of grief. Research participants note that grief and the personal impact of grief are rarely expressed publically. Cultural norms affect our perception and experience, and influence our private and public expressions of grief. There is a strongly held perception that grief is uncomfortable for many of us and there is a tendency to expect people to 'move on' and get back to 'normal'. One of the survey participant's comments:

*attitudes seem to be if you don't talk about it, it doesn't exist. Death is something we are required to get over in a short time because it makes people feel uncomfortable*

Many participants feel that society puts pressure on people to grieve alone. They speak about the way society influences how we should or should not react to death and grief. The following comments illustrate attitudes that are expressed by a number of participants:

*A time of great grief and sadness, I don't think our society deals with it well at all. Sterile funeral homes, no real rituals besides the funeral. Once the funeral is over, well, you have to get on with it. Our society is no good at dealing with the strong emotion of grief.*

Here again, we see participants' attitude to discomfort with death and grief and the time that it may take to process it:

*People don't seem to know what to say to someone who's loved one has died. There is also a perception than people should get over the death of a loved one sooner than would realistically happen*

Some of the survey participants express it like this:

*People change the topic when you want to talk about it as it makes them feel uncomfortable. They tell you to be strong and to hold in emotions, which is not beneficial.*

*Mostly we want to avoid and ignore the processes of death, dying and grief....too little time is spent assisting others to pass or helping people with their loss and grieving*

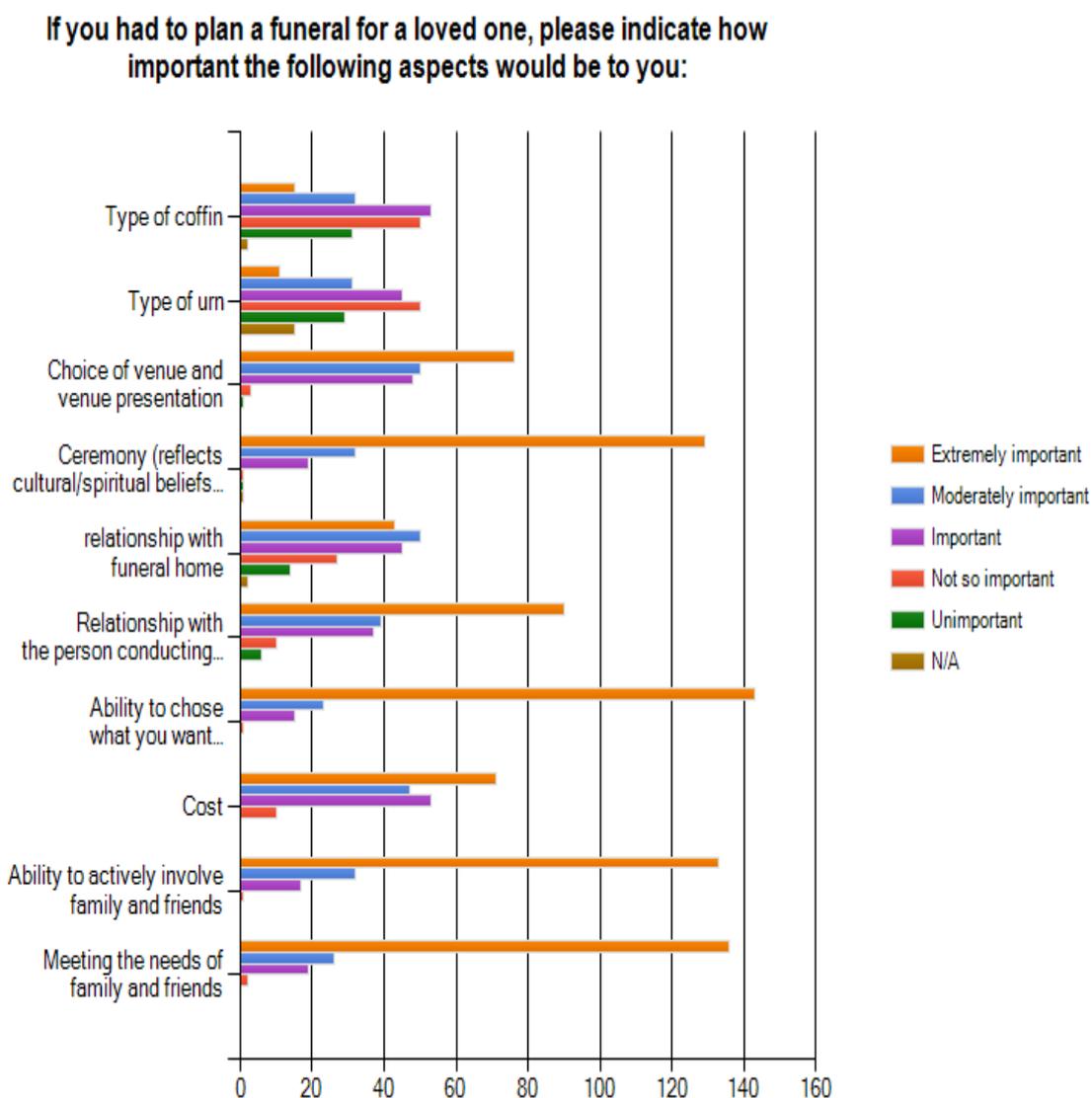
Our complex and contradictory relationship with death is perhaps best reflected in this comment from one of our research participants:

*We want novels with endings, we want life without ending. Most people cringe at discussion of death, which is silly, given that it is one of the most important things one can (must) do in life.*

## What people most value in funeral practices

A key dimension of this study involves exploring what people consider of 'value' in the after death practices.

In our survey, the meaning and value given to funeral practices is explored both from the perspective of planning one's own funeral and planning a funeral for a loved one.



**Figure 1: Important aspects of a Funeral for a Loved One**

Figure 1 shows results when planning a funeral for a loved one. The ability to choose what you want is clearly the most important for survey respondents. 143 out of 182 identified this as extremely important and only one person regarded it as not important at all. Involving family and friends, is also highly valued by survey respondents with 133 respondents identifying this as

extremely important and once again only one person identifying it as important at all. Meeting the needs of family and friends is also highly valued with 136 of 183 respondents identifying this as extremely important and only 2 respondents identifying it as not important. Ensuring that the ceremony reflects the spiritual, cultural and religious beliefs of the person who has died is clearly a very important aspect of funeral practices. It is rated as extremely important by 129 respondents while only 3 of the 183 respondents rated it as unimportant. The value or meaning given to the type of urn type of coffin and the costs of the funeral is much less important than beliefs, values and relationships reflected in funeral practices. However, it is important to remember that the cost of a funeral for many people is a reflection of the love that they have for their loved one- the higher the cost of the funeral the more loved, respected and valued the person who died was.

When survey respondents identified the aspects of the funeral that would give most value and meaning to *their own* funeral, the results are very similar. Choice, the ability to involve and meet the needs of family and friends and ensure that the ceremony reflected the spiritual, cultural and religious beliefs of the person who had died all rate very highly.

In our interviews, the most important elements of funeral practice that participants value is the ceremony and the way that it reflects the deceased person's life. Participants emphasise that it is important to carry out the beliefs or wishes of a loved one. A large number of participants also speak about the value they place on family and friends involvement in the ceremony. This participant's response encompasses some of these elements:

*Probably some music would be important to me. Maybe one of my mum's favourite hymns or something or favourite scripture probably if the kids weren't too emotional, To stand up and speak about the good things"*

*Death is often surrounded by fear and anxiety...funerals should celebrate the good things, A celebration of life and its achievements and a way for family and friends to find a peaceful closure after a passing*

A common view among participants particularly those who had organised a funeral, is that it is important to incorporate in their service the wishes of the person who had died. A participant explains it like this:

*it was simple but still nice, mum wasn't like that she didn't want a big fuss about things the people who loved her she knows were there and she had flowers*

Another participant describes it this way:

*yes you would have to find out what they wanted and you'd have to know them a little bit to know – because I know somebody who was on our board many years ago and passed away . She wasn't religious at all and their family organised this huge, big religious ceremony. She would have turned*

*in her grave.*

Other participants speak of designing their own funeral in order to ensure that they have the type of funeral they want.

Thus, honouring the wishes of the deceased is considered an important element of the ceremony and while it may create conflict and at times hardship for a family, many participants identify its significance. The following response is a great example of how the family has honoured their loved one's religious beliefs despite having their own strong cultural customs:

*Culturally mum was a Christian so they didn't have any Aboriginal part of it, at the church because she was a Christian even though we wanted to do it because she was Aboriginal. It was her church that's where mum went to so we respected that.*

In both the interviews and the survey many participants express the importance of "actively involving family and friends.". This aspect of the funeral holds significant meaning for them and creates a sense of ownership for those participating:

*within my family and extended family, where funerals are conducted within Anglican traditions, there seems to be a growing trend for younger people to play a more active role in all aspects of the ceremony, and want ownership of the funeral*

A survey participant indicates the importance of being involved in the process:

*I would defiantly want to design and create my own service and be actively apart of the process for any of my close family*

Many participants comment on the importance of conveying the sense of connection with others:

*well you can go to – what's the word- grandiose but the important thing is the people who were connected with that person's life and it doesn't matter whether there are flowers, bells or people singing ,it's the people that t person's life and their time on earth*

The research shows that there is much diversity in how people commemorate death, and this diversity is a reflection of how we view life. A participant from our survey explains it like this:

*It's important to me that I get to talk to my family about what I want the things I would like emphasised, and also what they would want, death is mostly an unknown phenomenon. Personally I believe that it is foolish to not think of death for it may come at any time. Live each day as if it is your last, preparing for your own funeral relieves the burden from others but in the preparation of the funeral the opportunity exists for loved ones*

*to express their thanks and love towards the deceased. as they are the ones grieving then the process of organising a funeral, grounds them if you like, gives them purpose and a desire to push on. The dead must be returned to dust, how is a matter of personal taste, but funerals are for the living not the dead.*

Without sensitive and careful attention to personal beliefs, values, cultural and spiritual customs the funeral practice may easily be disempowering for the mourner. Participants express they want attention to ceremony and smoothly executed procedures in carrying out the ceremony and having choice is significant for them.

Another aspect of the funeral process that participants identify as highly important is the quality of the relationship between the funeral practitioner and the bereaved. A strong view expressed during the research is that people prefer a personal connection with the person speaking about the deceased person. As one participant says:

*I would like two or three people to talk on behalf of me, not someone from the funeral parlour who doesn't know me, who has only collected information about me from my family*

This participant reiterates the value of a personal connection to the deceased:

*Because I think it's putting someone up there and speaking to all your loved ones, everyone you've ever known, and it's them-someone who knew you the most and they're talking about you and your memories and your life and this nice stuff, hopefully all about you. Then they're projecting it to everyone that knew in your life, so it's like they are making a memory of you even though you're not there so it's important*

A number of participants in our study describe unsatisfactory experiences during funerals as a result of the celebrant having little or no connection with the deceased . The following participant relays one of these experiences:

*I know some of the funerals I've been to , one of the funerals I've been to one of the things I don't like is where the person up there is talking ,the minister or funeral director, whoever they are, and they get their names wrong. They don't know anything about them. They fluff their way through it and it's real –and I just think how sad for that family.*

Another participant, expressing her disappointment, shows how this disconnection with the deceased profoundly influences her experience of the ceremony:

*I am saddened to have attended some church services where the focus was on the ritual instead of deceased person and the grieving family and utterly dismayed at the lack of sensitivity of the people conducting the services*

Another theme to emerge from the data relates to the way in which participants perceive the role of the funeral practitioner.

### **Funeral homes and after death practices**

This study strongly reflects the ways in which the funeral industry both reflects our attitudes and regulates our choices. This dominant theme, reflecting this interaction emerges when participants reflect on organising a funeral. The following participant expresses her sense of inadequacy around the funeral process this way,

*I don't think I'm a good organiser. I don't think I have any in-depth knowledge needed for organising a funeral.*

Many participants in this study echo this sentiment, and others link the reliance on 'experts' to the vulnerable, often disempowered position of the bereaved. One survey respondent's comments reflect this:

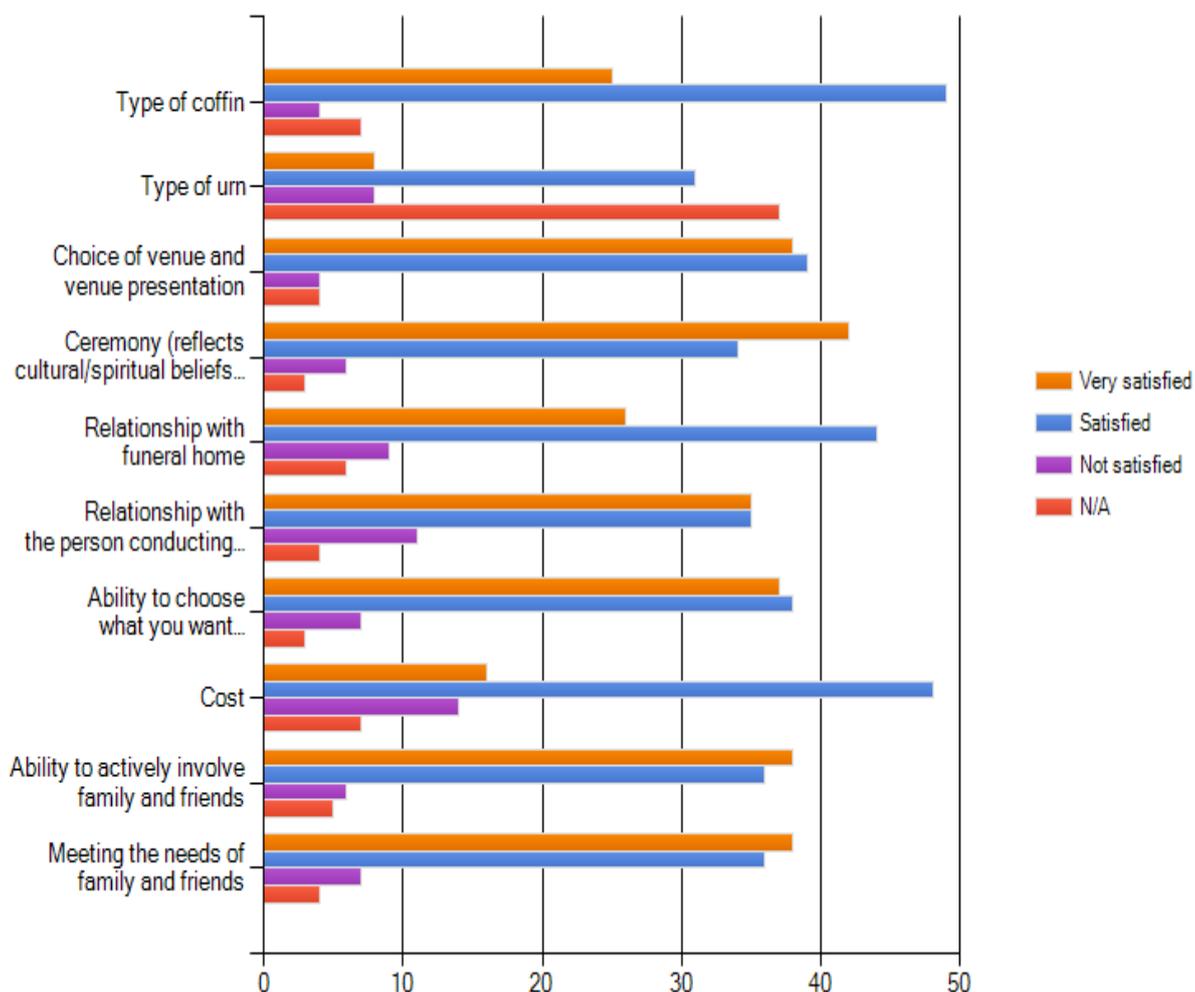
*Unless you work in the "death" Industry most of us have only a fleeting association with funerals etc...death of a loved one can be a vulnerable time in peoples' lives. We rely on the ethics and good will of the "experts" to assist us through the experience...at a time like that when you're grieving ,there's a lot of things, lots of detail that you don't get a chance to think about*

We either feel we lack the skills or aren't emotionally strong enough to cope with the necessary tasks when we are grieving. Participants frequently say they don't know about choices, or are not aware that there is any choice about how to do a funeral, other than to engage the services of a funeral home. Most people do not give it much thought, particularly if their experience with funerals is limited. After death practices have shifted from the family home to the funeral home, and most participants in our study assume that the only option you have to manage the tasks involved with a loved one's death is to engage a funeral home.

This view is also reflected in the survey results. The majority of survey participant's respond that they would contact the funeral home or family and friends as their first port of call if they needed to organise a funeral.

This research also explores participants' level of satisfaction with current funeral practices with which they have been involved. In the survey, only 85 respondents answer the question about whether they would change anything about the funeral with which they had been involved. (103 respondents did not answer this question, perhaps because they had no experience in organising a funeral). The results show that 48.2% would make changes and 51.8% that would make no changes. However when asked to identify how satisfied they were with particular aspects of the funerals they had experienced the results show a high level of satisfaction with many aspects. (see Figure 2 below).

**If you have been involved in organising a funeral, please rate how satisfied you were with each of the following?**



**Figure 2: Levels of satisfaction with funeral arrangements**

This graph shows high levels of satisfaction with the type of coffin (74 out of 85); choice of venue and venue presentation (77 out of 85); the ceremony (66 out of 85); the relationship with the funeral home (70 out of 85); the relationship with the person conducting the funeral (70 out of 85); the level of choice (75 out of 85) and the ability to actively involve family and friends (74 out of 85). The lowest level of satisfaction is with the cost where 14 respondents report being not satisfied.

When respondents are asked to identify what changes they would make a range of responses are given, including changing the influence of particular family members, the cost, having more say about how the funeral is conducted and a better relationship with the person conducting the funeral. Other respondents identify that they would take a more proactive approach having now had some experience with organising a funeral.

Overall, participants who were interviewed express a level of satisfaction with the funeral home who organised the funeral. At the same time most respondents express a high level of curiosity and interest when different options and choices about funerals are discussed with them.

### **Relationship between cost and value**

A tension evident in our conversations with participants is in relation to 'value' and 'cost' associated with funerals. There is a sense that how much you spend is reflective of how much you value the person. This tension reflects some of the conflicting messages we are exposed to when it comes to arranging a funeral. How best to honour the deceased person and their wishes, meet cultural expectations and social norms; and to balance cost and 'value':

*I think we feel it has to be an extravagant send off when it doesn't have to be*

Even participants that are reluctant to go for the most expensive funeral express conflicted feelings about ensuring their loved one has what they perceived a good "send off":

*you kind of feel like you're wasting all that money for someone that has already passed away . They probably don't even want you to waste that money. If somebody really wants you to really spend a lot of money you'd do it for them, but me no...*

The amount spent on a funeral reflects the sense of respect and honouring of the deceased. The following participant indicates that they feel pressure to buy the more expensive coffin and perhaps that it is implied this would be a reflection of how much they value their loved one.

*I felt a bit not ashamed but a bit like I would have given her something better if I could have ....because he offered the good ones first and that felt like in other circumstances ...It felt like hang on isn't your mum good enough, I don't know if it was me . Because he offered the most expensive first it felt a bit strange*

Other participants identify the part cultural and community expectations play in driving the cost of the funeral. The following participant expresses it like this:

*Funeral for us is very expensive, my father's funeral cost \$60000. It is expected they do work all their life for this. But it's what other people in the community expect. It's not what I would do 60 grand is a lot of money, when the family can benefit from it*

## Impact of cost

One of the significant findings to emerge from this study is that a large number of participants have concerns about the expense of funerals. Particularly in a region with a low socio-economic profile, the burden of cost can be significant. Many participants feel they would be unable to cover this cost.

If the minimum cost of a basic funeral is approximately \$5000, how easy would it be for you to meet this cost?

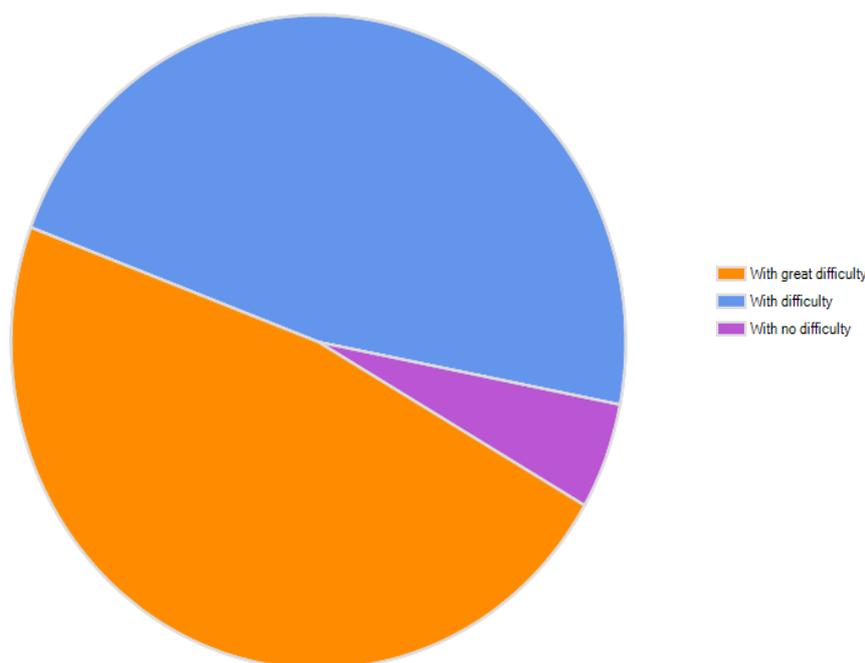


Figure 3: How difficult would it be for you to meet the cost of a basic funeral

As illustrated in Figure 3, 69.5% of the survey respondents would struggle with the cost of a basic funeral. In fact 22.8% identify that they would have great difficulty while only 30.4% predict they would have no difficulty.

One participant expresses it this way:

*My sister –unfortunately she’s ill. She did not have a pre-paid funeral but she has life insurance which is very minimal...My sister has small grandchildren that come into it, the economic side, so we have to be very intelligent, balance and practical. So that’s what we are dealing with now. ....We were all emotional, of course if you put the - her family, grandchildren, they have mortgages. You have to be practical. Although we are very empathy and sensitive and understanding, but you have to balance it- the practicality, what we can afford, the young children’s future. So it was difficult.*

Generally participants feel it is up to them if they are next of kin or close friends of the deceased to come up with the money to cover the cost of the funeral. A number of young people who participated in this study, notably

those from Macedonian and Italian backgrounds express their concerns about meeting the costs of funerals this way:

*My mum didn't have a lot of money ...we all had to pull together. I was amazed at how expensive it was to die*

Some participants speak about wanting to ensure that their funeral costs are not a burden for family. They report choosing less expensive options such as the scattering of their ashes, rather than the incurring the cost of placing them in a memorial wall at a cemetery:

*Covering the cost is important. I have talked with my family that I wish to be cremated and ashes scattered at the location that is special to me and where they are comfortable to "visit" and enjoy the surroundings*

A number of participants express anxiety at having not factored the cost of a funeral into their budgets. When asked to consider the impact that this cost would have on their families much express alarm, as one participant says:

*For me today I'm a single mum now so it's just myself and my daughter now so yes it would have an impact if I died who would pay for it, so I haven't really allowed for that. If my daughter died I'm not sure where I would get the money from because it is very expensive I know they are very expensive, money is an issue for me.*

And another:

*Death is a subject not really spoken about in general. I think we all worry about the cost of our own funeral impacting on our family*

Some participants in this study identify a sense of pressure to purchase the 'full' package of items offered by the funeral homes. Their stories indicate that there is pressure to choose a more expensive funeral package, or extra services when arranging a funeral. You can choose a very simple funeral but because of a perceived pressure this is sometimes difficult to feel comfortable with. Even the cost of a basic funeral has an impact on families. One participant found it to be a very difficult experience:

*I found it fairly you know very cold a lot and there were a fair bit of pressure.. to spend a lot of money.. I didn't feel they made the process easy necessary it was very cold and it was very matter of fact and a lot of it was focus a lot around money and finances*

The burden of cost is particularly difficult for Aboriginal families who not only have to meet the cost when they organise a funeral but incur costs regularly in attending community funerals. As one Aboriginal woman tells us:

*In Aboriginal culture you get a lot of people come to your house when someone dies you get mobs sometimes 50 show up. Travel is a cost at least*

*one shows up to represent the family cause they know it's a fact that everybody hasn't got money at the same time. It's not taken lightly if you don't come believe me they know if you haven't been...hasn't been up the coast for a funeral in a long time they're questioning it.*

Participants also identify the role that marketing can play in creating a sense of anxiety around managing the cost associated with death. They report feeling pressured by advertisements on television that invite viewers to sign up for pre-payment funeral plans so they do not leave their family with a funeral debt:

*They're asking for one third deposit which was \$1000 plus then I have to pay \$80 a month for 36 months. I told the children I don't know how to start saving for it. That's a big problem*

For some, having a pre-organised plan reduces the burden of this anxiety. However, in a few cases maintaining their payments for a plan proved difficult and resulted in a significant financial burden, as this participant explains:

*Cost is a concern cause, I had a funeral fund and it fell through I paid into it for years, 15 -18 thousand dollars I paid into it. It was through Christmas when I couldn't afford to pay it and got behind 3 payments tried to make arrangements but couldn't keep up so it fell through. I lost it so I don't get a cent and I done that for my husband too, because it was coming out of my bank account. I lost both of them nearly 30 thousand dollars.*

In conclusion, a significant finding to emerge from this study is that many participants feel anxious about meeting the costs of funerals. Some participants said they prepare as best they can, but that these plans do not always work out as expected. Some report choosing less expensive options in advance of the event and others say that they did not prepare or plan but express alarm when they become aware of the costs involved. Some speak about the experience of pressure to choose a more expensive funeral. Participants also report that the pressure of cost can combine with pressure from family and cultural expectations and that this can be overwhelming. The next section discusses the diversity of practices surrounding death reflecting in particular the experiences of the multicultural community of the Illawarra.

## **Diversity of practices around death and after death**

This study shows that there is a diversity of cultural practices in mourning the end of life. For example one participant describes her cultural practices this way:

*Coming from a Samoan background, the ritual of death was a beautiful experience. The week leading up to my father's funeral saw my house*

*alive with people and celebration. There were moments of stillness...but most importantly it was really valuable for my mother who had a constant presence of women surrounding her. The body of my father was in the house for 3 days, where everyone in the community came to pay their respects. The immediate family have to sleep in the same room as the body. It's a reassuring symbol that comforts me to this day.*

The study also finds that there are some conventional after death practices that conflict with some participants cultural values. The following extract from one of the focus groups expresses the type of difficulty that some participants experience when they encounter standard practice that does not consider the families' cultural customs and beliefs about after death processes:

*When my mother-in-law passed away they put her in a private room. In my culture if you lost somebody in my life I was crying my guts out. I saw my brother-in-law he was just standing there, he had no choice. I don't know how people feel but in my culture it's very sad, we lost somebody who died. They put her in a private room and said that's it, we're going to leave her here and they are going to take her away. So we left her behind, we said goodbye to her and we went home. In my country its different, their own family has to take him or her to the morgue and wrap them up properly. Then it takes time for you to go and take the body out. It was unusual we were not involved. We ended up seeing her, not seeing her but just in the church at the funeral service that's all.*

The above comment highlights just how different cultural practices around death can be and the difficulties that can arise when these cultural practices differ from the dominant ways of dealing with death.

Another participant also describes a different cultural practice that involves a more direct relationship with the cremation of the deceased body and an ecological approach to the recycling of coffins:

*my experience in the Philippines they just put the person on a tray and the family watch while the body is being cremated...it's up to the family what you want to do with the coffin you can donate it to somewhere*

Whilst not everybody in Australia chooses to view the deceased person prior to burial, participants from a Filipino background describe this as common practice in the Philippines.

A Macedonian woman describes the ritual involved in Macedonian funeral practices, again reflecting the diversity:

*A year ago my dad died he was Macedonian ...lots of procedures, lots of things that have to be done. we have traditions once they pass away we go back to our house all the lights are on in our house –inside and outside. The front door stays open to get rid of Karma, spirits, things like that*

*anybody is welcomed into the home we have to provide peanuts ,a certain food, alcohol and the house is open 24 hours a day ,people come and go until the day of the funeral. Men and women can't shave, cant clean everything has to be done for us we are not allowed to do that because we are in mourning.....dad passed away in palliative care from there he went to the funeral home then he was brought to the home then we celebrate at the house ,then we do a drive of where he was living with his body we get out of the care and walk I think its for about 500 metres just the immediate family ,then were given water in a vase and we pour it around the car that's to let out the spirits its purity for him this goes on for six months .at the cemetery every Sunday we go and pour the water around....*

This participant also describes the role of the funeral director in supporting funeral traditions and ironically how the community now looks to the funeral director to ensure these cultural traditions are properly performed.

Participants interviewed in this study, who were newly arrived immigrants or refugees, express how different their practices around death and dying are in their country of origin. For example, some of these participants describe the communal nature of their funeral practices -the community cremate the deceased, and gather for a wake at the family home bringing food for the mourners. The expense is minimal to the bereaved family as it is absorbed by the community.

Their experiences of funeral practices in Australia are very different. Many participants feel that their culture and beliefs are seldom taken into consideration particularly in relation to the initial few days following a death. They speak of their experiences of confusion and distress when trying to understand the conventions in Australia around death and their struggles to have their traditions honoured:

*It was very challenging for them financially, we went to charity organisations to give us donations, I asked the council for a plot and they said no, if we do that for you then we would have to do it for everybody. We were running around like a mad cow, things weren't very clear.*

This participant's story was not uncommon, and needless to say the issue of cost represents an enormous challenge for many communities as the convention in Australia to 'purchase' a funeral and hand over the process is so foreign.

The experiences of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in relation to death and after death practices, bring into sharp focus the need for greater attention to responding to diversity within the current conventions around death and funeral practices. In particular, recently

arrived communities from Africa and South East Asia are under resourced and disadvantaged when negotiating with existing services to realise the funerals that meet with their traditions.

***Researcher's Voice***

*I began this research thinking that I had played a big part in organising both my parent's funerals so I knew how it was done. By the time I was into the second interview I started to realise how many different customs there are in dealing with death. Now I no longer look at it as one standard funeral, but that there are many different ideas that participants educated me on. Did I think my mothers and fathers funerals were how they would have wanted it? Yes but.... it's now not how I would want mine. Researching this has opened my eyes up to many different options available. I appreciate the honesty that the participants gave me. They let me into a part of their world that many had not spoken about with anyone. It was always satisfying when participants ended their interviews or groups telling me that they are now going to let someone close know what their wishes are and wanted to know more about options available.*

## **Knowledge of other options about after death and funeral practices**

As part of our appreciative enquiry we initiated many conversations with participants introducing often new information and ideas about natural options in after death and funeral processes. These conversations open up new territory and ask people to consider what different practices might look like for them. We discuss various natural options available including the ability to keep the deceased in the home for up to five (5) days with appropriate equipment, eco-coffins and holding funerals in public areas such as parks and beaches.

On the whole, participants in this study admit to having limited information about processes surrounding death. Some participants described the process as 'a mystery', generally unsure about who can do what, what is involved and for most people given little attention, unless they have had the responsibility of organising a funeral.

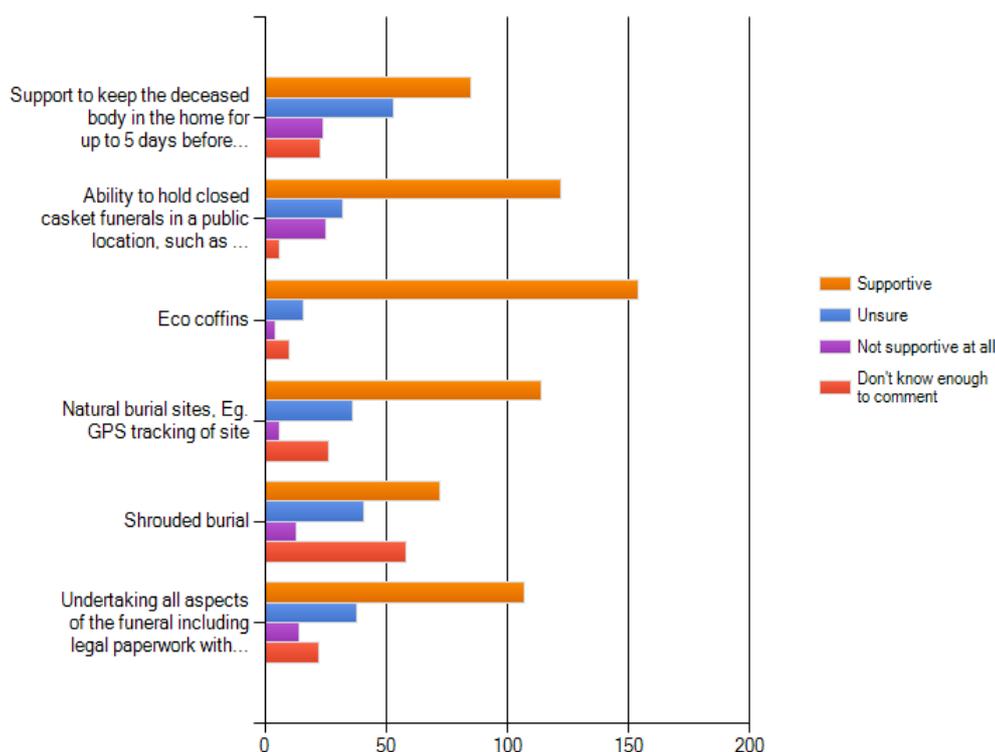
In our survey, 80.9% of respondents say they do not know about the range of options they could choose for funeral practices. A significant number of survey respondents are unaware of other options regarding funerals and this demonstrates the lack of education and information available to the public. Having that information is considered very important, especially to this

worker:

*More information about choices would be very helpful, so that we can help our clients...we never take the time, but then when it happens we don't know how to guide and support people... it would be good to have a place to go for this information*

Overall, participants respond with curiosity and interest when the possibilities are discussed with them. This is also consistent with the survey results.

**Currently there are a number of options available for funerals. How would you feel about the following?**



**Figure 4: Attitudes to Natural Funeral Options**

Almost 70% of respondents are supportive of holding a funeral in a public place (122 out of 185 respondents); 61.6% are supportive of natural burial sites (114 out of 185) and 57.8% of undertaking all aspects of the funeral arrangements (107 of 185 respondents). Eighty three percent of respondents (154 out of 185) are supportive of the idea of using an eco coffin (See figure 4).

These results are supported by our interviews where many participants express an interest in knowing more about the possibilities around funeral practices:

*Understanding our options concerning funerary rites is extremely important, yet still ignorant to many including myself! It would be good to know these options and legal rights*

Options around body handling are of interest but participants are generally not informed as to what is possible under current regulations. One survey participant talks about the benefits she gains from having time to spend with the person after death:

*I know, from experience, that a body doesn't have to be immediately removed from the home. Having my friend 'lay in state' in her home for 24 hours was wonderful for closure.*

Other participants could see the value in having time to grieve and to spend time with the body of the deceased person:

*I never knew that you could take the body home and that would be really important.....really good if somebody died very suddenly, you know, without knowing if you wanted to take them home and grieve in your own time with them and for different cultures.*

In our interviews there is a mixed response to the use of eco-coffins or cardboard coffins as they are more commonly known. On the one hand there are environmental concerns:

*Oh definitely, I'd be very interested in anything that is environmentally friendly and I know my family would as well. It's something that we're all fairly conscious of. So something that was offered and available in our area in regards to that, yes, definitely"*

While on the other hand some participants thought that a deceased loved one deserves better than a cardboard coffin as their final resting place:

*a coffin is how I would show my last respects to a loved one and I believe they deserve the best. It [eco coffin] may look the same but I would know that it's a cheap coffin*

The option of holding a funeral in a public area receives mixed reactions from participants. Some are concerned with feeling uncomfortable and say they would leave the area:

*It would bring you down even as a bystander it would probably ruin your day. I'd probably leave the park, give them their space I think it's more because they're mourning. They don't want people running around being all happy and stuff...I don't believe in displaying yourself at a time like that. I would say that they would have to carefully choose where they were going. It wouldn't make any difference to anyone else, I would say because it is something to be respected.*

Other interviewees describe how they would prefer these ceremonies to be in a designated or private area within a public domain but would still feel out of place:

*Probably not, no. There's a time and a place. I mean- if I could be assured that it was private place and that we weren't going to have people looking*

*in on our grief and we weren't disturbing other people's non- grieving time, then yeah, that would be lovely. A nice bushland setting or a park setting that would be beautiful. But it would have to be – the privacy factor for both sides- would have to be of high importance.*

These attitudes to more open grieving and funeral practices may also reflect denial of death a common cultural norm as previously discussed.

Although many participants express wanting to conduct funerals in private settings, others are interested in the idea of having a service in a park or at the beach:

*Yeh I can't imagine being uncomfortable with that. I guess the discomfort I think I would have is if I walked on the scene and I didn't know what was going on....I'd hope that an experience like that would open up an opportunity to talk about death with my kids.*

#### **Researcher's Voice**

*During our research there were so many questions about cost, pre paying services, how the cost could be met if they have no money, what happens to the body during the funeral process and many more. I felt privileged to be part of a team giving information and allowing people to know that there are choices. I have worked in the funeral industry for many years and so could answer these questions truthfully. I was saddened when people spoke of feeling they had no control over the funeral processes whether because of other family members, cost or grief. When my mother died I had knowledge, choice and control. This meant our family could close my mother's last chapter of life in a most memorable, beautiful way.*

*Knowledge, information and choice is really important. This research is part of a process to bring about change and give people more options and I am glad to be part of this. My hope is that information about options finds its way to those who need it, which from experience would make the world of difference to a lot of people.*

## **Re-storying death and after death practices**

A primary purpose of this small study is to engage the community in conversation about experiences of after death and to introduce different ways of doing death. It is in listening to these stories of difference that the conversation opens up new thinking around death and after death practices. One story that emerges from a focus group shows how a community came together to hold a funeral ceremony at the local beach where the deceased loved to surf. It shows the powerful impact that a funeral ceremony, conducted in a public and different way can have for those involved:

*Interviewee 1: Half the town came. He was a builder and he actually built -*

*started to build his own coffin, because he knew he only had about three weeks to go. They already amputated a leg. He got so sick; he couldn't finish the coffin, so he just whacked it up. It was pine; it was just like a normal box. His mate finished it. They put him on the back of - in the coffin - put him on the back of his truck with his surfboard. [All at dawn] it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.*

*Interviewee 2: Yeah, see this is what this is all about.*

*Interviewee 1: Drove him around the harbour. The whole town [unclear] were right - do you know where the rock pool near Kiama, down there?*

*Interviewee 2: Yes, yeah.*

*Interviewee 1: We were all there, we were all sitting there. They had some music, played his songs, drove the Ute to the front with the thing. Then just cremated him and threw his ashes where he surfed.*

*Well that's what they do on other countries.*

*Interviewee 2: That's right, yeah.*

*Interviewee 2: I didn't think you could do that...*

*Interviewee 1: You can.*

*Interviewee 1: You can do what you like, really, as long as you...*

This account emerges in a number of different conversations and led to others in the groups talking about different possibilities around "doing death". The experience of these conversations is that participants think about and become very interested in new ways of organising and participating in funerals in ways that assist the celebration of life and grieving process.

During another focus group, a participant describes an experience that her grandmother and family had in organising her funeral and how well it met their expectations. The following extract shows some of the conversation that emerge in the group and the impact it has on the participants:

*Interviewee 1: Can I tell you about my Nan.....My Nan died two years ago but she knew. She had a bit of notice of what was going to happen to her. It wasn't really a [planned] sort of thing. She actually contacted the Natural Death Centre and figured out you don't have to go to a funeral director. You can do it on your own and the proper ways to go with the legislation and everything. So she found out the right way to do it. She had her coffin built. She got everybody she knew to come and paint it. It was just a masterpiece. Even my kids went down and painted my Nan's coffin. We had rainbows and we had love hearts and we had*

*horses and we had all sorts of stuff all over the outside of it. I've got photos of it at home. It was a work of art. It was just fantastic. Yeah, she organised someone to build it for her. She had everything organised from like where she wanted to actually be buried to what she wanted to be buried in. And what she wanted everyone to wear to the funeral and she took care of the whole thing....She had terminal cancer and she died at home. She didn't want to go to the hospital, she didn't want to go to a hospice and she said I don't want to die with strangers pretty much. So she [stayed at] home, we all took turns looking after her. My kids were there, my cousin's kids were there, my sister's kids were there, everybody was there. Everybody knew what was going to happen. It's really...*

*Interviewee 2: Was it morbid?*

*Interviewee 1: No it wasn't, it wasn't really morbid. It wasn't really depressing. It was really - it's one of those you can't live forever sort of things. People die. You're born, you live, you die sort of thing. I think my kids really appreciated it.*

*Interviewee 3: It's just like with C how her Nan did her own funeral box. I find when I've talked to a lot of people about funerals they actually complain about the price that they've paid for something that's just going into the ground. Thousands of dollars for something that you see for a couple of seconds and then...*

*Interviewee 2: Then it's gone.*

This interviewee retells his story of arranging a funeral for a friend providing another example of how different options are naturally emerging as the desire for a different type of service becomes more common:

*Sort of one. I mean, I don't know if you can even call it that. There was a friend of mine when we lived in Memphis Tennessee and his family was Buddhist but he was Christian the family asked me to organise some sort of, I don't know I don't even remember we were making it up. I mean I've not been trained in funerals or anything like that but we made something up that was appropriate. They had memorial service I think is what we ended up calling it, in the evening*

This study strongly shows how important opening up conversations in our communities about death and after death practices can be and the lack of information available around natural options that precludes our choices. Some of the responses from participants demonstrate this need for more knowledge and choice:

*It's nice to have choices cause we usually only know it's that way and that's what we expect...I don't think some people might feel comfortable*

*and they might not realise that you can have choices so I don't think there's a lot of awareness about that so I think it would be good to have more awareness*

In conclusion, the study shows that the prevailing attitude is one of fear and denial of death. A review of the norms around grief show that society expects a quick recovery and many participants experience a lack of support when they are grieving. A feature of this study is that the relationship between funeral homes and community is complex. The industry simultaneously reflects our attitudes and regulates our choices. A strong emergent voice is that there is a lack of information and knowledge of options other than those offered by the funeral industry. Another strong voice expresses concerns about the cost of funeral practices. While participants' responses to different ways of doing death vary, there is a strong interest in having more information available and opportunities to learn from each other. The next section will discuss our findings in light of relevant literature and research into death and after death practices.

***Researcher's Voice***

*As a researcher my knowledge and understanding of after death and funeral practices was minimal. Having the opportunity to listen to participants stories was a valuable learning experience. I now have a better understanding of cultural differences when planning a funeral and also natural options that are available, such as eco coffins and body handling. I feel the data we received indicates a yearning for information about natural funeral options and after death processes. From the experience I have had throughout this project, I believe that change is necessary to ensure that all people are empowered with the knowledge to make decisions when the time comes.*

## **Discussion**

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This section of the report aims to link the findings from the study with the international and national literature. Firstly, in this section we discuss the complexity of death and the vulnerability of the mourner, particularly when in a decision-making role. Secondly we outline how funeral services can be potentially empowering for the mourner, or lead to an experience of disempowerment. Thirdly, we explore themes about the fear and denial of death, the desire to show respect for the dead, consumer satisfaction and choice versus lack of knowledge and choice, the commercialisation of death and some groups' efforts to change current practice and address environmental and other concerns.

### **The Complexity of Death**

This study highlights that death and after death practice is a complex process highly influenced by a diversity of social, cultural and religious norms. Despite the inevitability of death many participants in the study express that they had not thought about it much. Many participants had no experience in organising a funeral and identify as having limited knowledge. A small percentage of respondents had prior experience of organising a funeral. Those who had direct experience certainly had thought about it much more. Whilst only a small minority had some experience of organising a funeral, the majority of participants speak of experiences associated with a multitude of practices in how we conduct after death processes.

The topic of death and funeral practice is a hugely contested area of study. Different scenarios surrounding death evoke different responses and meaning. Responses are influenced by the circumstances surrounding death. A child's death or a sudden death is different to that of someone who is released from suffering through death. Death may come slowly or it might come suddenly. If it comes quickly it deprives us of the ability to say goodbye. It is not something we can schedule or control (Howarth, 2007).

This small study conducted in the Illawarra region reflects this complexity. It gives voice to the personal experiences and attitudes towards after death practices. Mostly this voice expresses an appreciation for the way after death practices are currently conducted. It also expresses an appreciation for the opportunity to reflect on what is important to participants who had already been involved and those that will inevitably be involved in after death processes.

One of the main discussion points is that most participants expressed appreciation about being able to hand the funeral process over to the care of experts at a funeral home. One of the strong voices that can be heard in the study describes this as a comforting and easy option when faced with the

complexity of death.

A smaller but distinct voice speaks of this process of handing over to the experts as not turning out as they had hoped. Some participants note that it is easier to just say yes to something within the range of what is offered by the mainstream funeral industry rather than to take control. A small number of participants share that when they feel vulnerable they are less likely to advocate for their ideal funeral and for some participants this led to an experience of disempowerment.

A second strong discussion point to emerge from the study suggests that the role of the 'mourner' can either be empowered or disempowered. The study shows that the mourner is particularly vulnerable when taking a lead role in the organising of a loved one's funeral. This role can be challenging and confronting, particularly within days of the death of a loved one. Participants in the study predict that one of the biggest factors in their vulnerability is negotiating and meeting the cost of funerals. They frequently remark that the cost of funerals is a major concern. This will be further explored later in the discussion.

The capacity of bereaved relatives to negotiate with funeral directors about charges and services is compromised by two factors. These are vulnerability as a result of grief and inexperience in the tasks to be undertaken (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2005)

### **Fear and Denial of Death**

A third discussion point emerges from a persistent voice in the study that says the topic of death is taboo.

Experience of the war years re-enforced the denial of death in Australia. When faced with the huge loss incurred by war, Australians were encouraged to grieve in private. This suppressed sorrow was a cultural shift brought on by the impact of war.

The tendency that many participants identify as handing over responsibilities regarding after death processes to the experts suggests that death is still something we would rather not face. This perception emerges strongly in the study and many participants identify this as a prevailing attitude.

What is interesting and emergent here is another strong voice that simultaneously expresses a desire to demystify death. Many participants when engaging with the research team in conversations about death and funeral practices identify the benefits of sharing information and experiences with others, thinking about what 'good' funeral practice might look like and appreciating the opportunity to speak about something commonly experienced as "taboo".

The natural death movement is increasingly bringing death into the open. This movement asks us to consider options such as eco friendly cardboard coffins and procedures involved in the handling of the deceased body. It encourages the demystification of death by illuminating other options and getting people interested in the conversation.

### **What people value in after death practices**

Within the diversity of cultural practice a common theme is that the 'send off' is the best way to express love and respect for the deceased. The social need to do everything possible to honour and show respect at the funeral of a loved one and send them off well is in contrast to how we otherwise avoid death. In response to questions about what people consider to be of 'value', the overwhelming majority of participants in the study identify the ceremony as the most important aspect of the process. The capacity to meet the needs of family and friends and to genuinely facilitate their involvement is considered very important by many participants. Further to this, participants identify the representation of the deceased person's life, conveyed by those that knew them and had a significant connection to them is also what creates value.

Many participants indicate that another important way of showing respect for the dead is through cultural, religious and spiritual ritual. There is considerable diversity in these traditions and they have a potential influence how we think about and deal with death. Those uncomfortable with the words, symbols and gestures of mainstream religious practice may choose to incorporate spiritual or non religious-spiritual practices into the funeral process. Participants say that the ceremony and the ability to choose what they want and their relationship with the funeral practitioner are by far the most important elements of a 'good' funeral.

### **Consumer Satisfaction and Choice**

Historically, traditional funeral services were embedded in family practices and then family based funeral 'parlour' practice. The medicalisation of death appears to have contributed to the removal of death from the family realm to an institutional realm. The privatised world of the individual is mostly met by a corporate response seemingly tailored to the individual. This can be considered as a postmodern response to death. It highlights personal choice that appeals to the postmodern psychology of individuals who fear and want to distance themselves from their mortality (Howarth, 2007).

As outlined, participants in the study show a relatively high level of consumer satisfaction with the service they receive from funeral homes. However, the study illuminates the lack of knowledge in the community about funeral and after death processes. It's as though participants don't know what they don't know. Their responses show that community knowledge about choices and options is limited and this raises questions

about the availability of consumer information. Providing more information about a diversity of funeral practices from a range of community and cultural perspectives may be one way of opening up choice. The need for this information was one of the recommendations of the Legislative Council Inquiry into the funeral Industry. It is acknowledged that this information has been made available, but falls far short of what is required. Participants say that the range of choice offered by the funeral home industry is well articulated when they need it, but the broader range of choice outside of what is offered by the funeral home is not well known in the community.

Whilst most participants speak about how they appreciate funeral home practices in catering to individual needs, it is clear that they shape and regulate our experiences. The study demonstrates that it is often in conversation, when introduced to the possibility of other types of after death practice that participants reflect on possible change. They sometimes report that had they known about other options, they may have chosen to do things differently.

The study also confirms that there is more than one set of norms or stories about how death needs to be attended to. The literature shows that cultural norms are highly influential in how we think about death and after death practices (Howarth, 2007). Knowledge of funeral practices from a range of cultural perspectives informs our thinking and attitudes and ultimately our expectations and practices around death and funerals.

Some participants speak of how as second and third generation immigrants they have a complicated relationship with traditional religious customs regarding after death practices. They speak of being reliant on funeral homes to guide them through these dilemmas.

The situation for newly arrived communities raises different issues. The study illustrates the problems for these communities in endeavouring to have their cultural beliefs and customs accommodated by the funeral industry in Australia. Because they are new and small their specific cultural needs are not known, understood or catered for by the funeral industry. As with more established communities, the commercial imperative will make it likely that the funeral industry will respond over time. The communities' lack of knowledge of their rights compounds the problem and prevents people from practising and honouring their own traditions and beliefs and demanding more culturally appropriate practices from funeral homes (Larkin, 2009). Furthermore, if these communities were more knowledgeable and empowered they could meet their cultural traditions outside the funeral industry. Historically such change has required extensive lobbying of government institutions and regulatory authorities by communities to ensure access to their cultural practices (Larkins, 2007; Howarth, 1997; Jalland, 2002; Leimbach et al, 2009)

## **Commercialisation, marketisation and regulation of death**

Any discussion of death and after death processes must acknowledge that industry practice is both reflective of and reflected in the construction of community expectations and experiences. Most people in the study identified the funeral home as where they would seek help when faced with the death of a loved one. While they offer extensive services that cover after death processes, consumer options are highlighted within a certain range of choice, and wider options about after death practices are not canvassed. Options such as 'do it yourself' funerals, the option of taking the body back home, preparing the body, looking on the internet to access a cheaper coffin, or an eco-coffin are available, but knowledge of those options is very limited. This is clearly reflected in our conversations with participants during this study.

Most recently bereaved people face a lot of pressure regarding family and community expectations and want someone to take care of all the arrangements so they can look after their emotional needs and the needs of their families or friends. The findings show this is an appreciated option but they also show that there are people who want to have more say and control about the way after death processes are managed.

Discussion with the majority of participants shows that they were satisfied with their experience of funeral homes. They mention that they trust the funeral director to do the right thing and this happened. In contrast, a small number of participants articulate that they felt 'rushed' and were conscious of the need to move on before they were ready. Another spoke about a lack of personal representation of the deceased. This involved a lack of professionalism regarding preparation so as to become familiar with some important details about the deceased.

Prior to 1970 most funeral operators were family owned firms. In recent decades large Australian and international corporations have purchased these previously family owned businesses (NCOSS, 2005). Since 2002, InvoCare has become the largest business in the Australian industry. They currently own 123 funeral homes and 12 cemeteries and crematoriums. Recent media reports suggest that InvoCare has grown by 33% (InvoCare, 2011). The funeral industry has become a highly corporatized entity and unfortunately the cost of dying can become a significant financial burden for family and friends:

Control of the funeral process has shifted from the traditional community base to an industry monopoly, and the role of the bereaved has been reduced to that of a consumer (Larkins, 2007:1).

The funeral industry promotes their products through advertising in community spaces such as hospital emergency departments, palliative care, doctor's surgeries and aged care facilities. Naturally they promote their business and in the process familiarise and socialise people to expect and

participate in industry-based practice. In many ways, after death service has become another commodity that is informed and shaped by what is available through the funeral industry. The extent to which conventions are determined by industry led practices and existing relationships is clearly demonstrated by the Legislative Council Standing Committee on Social Issues inquiry into the Funeral Industry (2005). The inquiry notes that in most cases cemeteries and crematoriums will not deal directly with anyone other than a funeral director. Legally consumers can access cemeteries and crematoria. However the reality is that they may be confronted with cemeteries or crematoria that are reluctant to deal directly with consumers (Legislative Council, 2005:158).

The advent of the funeral fund is also a reflection of the commercialisation of death (Larkins, 2007). As mentioned, previously many participants in this study had or were considering the option of a pre-paid funeral and some were already in funeral funds. For many, this arrangement offers a level of comfort and security and eases concerns about burdening their families with the cost of their funeral. It can also lock people into expensive industry packages that may limit family and friends' participation in after death practices. Clearly finding a balance between 'managing' costs and enabling enough independence so that people can choose the involvement they need is important.

Local government is another arena that regulates and shapes our practices around death. Some Local Councils provide the option to hold a service at a local beach or park but these options are not well advertised. Other Councils have very restricted by-laws preventing this option.

To some extent this study illuminates the impact of a corporatised and commoditised approach to after death practice. The study shows contradictions between what is perceived as demonstrating respect and love for the deceased loved one and the commensurate cost of the funeral. Many participants identify a sense of pressure to purchase the best funeral so as to show how much they care, at the same time as expressing a discomfort and apprehension about this tension. Few people express awareness about what can be negotiated when organising a funeral and to what extent one can adopt a do it your-self approach.

### **Changing practice, shifting ground**

The shift by some community organisations and groups to conduct after death practice differently to current conventions is reported in the international and national literature. The literature identifies different ways of approaching funeral practices including taking the body home, expanding the limited places in which funerals can be held, increasing the types of coffins available, and paying more personalised attention to ceremony and funeral practices in general (Leimbach, et al 2009). In contrast, participants in the

study primarily say that they are mostly happy with traditional funeral services and they previously had not thought about these issues until they were introduced into the conversation.

Ideas about the value of 'natural burial' were introduced to Australia by the natural death movement in the mid twentieth century. These ideas have more recently gained momentum in response to a growing concern in the community about environmental factors and after death processes. These include the availability of burial space, the impact of toxic chemicals used by the funeral home industry and the waste of natural resources such as the wood used in coffins. Funeral practices need to get 'greener' (Larkins, 2007).

If the trend continues (in the UK) a green burial could be the preferred method of final placement within fifty years...In Australia a few bushland cemeteries have been established (Larkins, 2007:105).

Concerns about greenhouse emissions from the cremation process are emerging in the community and in the media. An Illawarra journalist Ms Michelle Hocter recently interviewed Mr Warwick Hanson from Hanson and Cole Funerals about this issue:

Cremation, while saving land stock, was estimated to emit 200-400 kilograms of greenhouse gas per person when using a conventional coffin. (Hocter, 2011:27)

A new trend in the United States is a process called Aquamation. This involves the liquefaction of the deceased body, thus avoiding high levels of greenhouse emission. However, the literature shows that there is a lot of controversy surrounding the topic of death practices (Howarth, 2007). Greener may be better and the natural burial movement is geared toward a greener, more eco-friendly approach.

The natural death movement aims to bring not only a greener approach to funeral practice but to re-open the 'lid' on death. The movement seeks to shift the culture surrounding death from one of avoidance and fear to curiosity and acceptance. The need for this is supported by the findings in this study. The perception that is most strongly represented in the data is that the culture surrounding death and after death practice is one of fear, denial and avoidance.

The research findings show that there is a real need for information to be more readily available. Participants in the study respond to the examination of funeral practices with interest. Most participants had not had the opportunity to explore natural options around death. The exception to this is when participants had a different experience associated with different cultural practice.

Shifting social attitudes from feelings of fear and denial about death to a culture of curiosity and acceptance relies on information, education and sharing knowledge. Increased television advertising about funeral insurance and funeral plans is likely encouraging more discussion about death and funerals in the family home. However, this is not yet occurring in the public arena. Participants in the study are generally welcoming of the opportunity to talk about and 'normalise' death. Some participants express this more strongly than others, but the general reaction to discussions with participants is one of appreciation for the chance to talk about the topic of death and funeral practices. The research strongly indicates that information needs to be more readily available to the public about rights, funeral options and after death processes.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the complexity of death, prevailing attitudes and the medicalisation of death all contribute to the positioning of after death practice in the institutional realm. This reflects a social psychology of desiring to distance oneself from mortality. As reported, participants in the study show a relatively high level of consumer satisfaction with traditional services. However, the study shows a lack of knowledge in the community about funeral and after death processes. Providing information and empowering immigrant and refugee communities about the diversity of funeral practices, would better meet their needs and open up choice for everyone. The need for this is noted in the recommendations of the Legislative Council Inquiry into the Funeral Industry (2005). Participants say that the range of choice offered by the funeral home industry is well articulated when they need it, but the broader range of choice outside of what is offered by the funeral home is not well known in the community. It is difficult for communities that have different after death practices in their country of origin, as well as individuals and communities that want something other than the conventional, to find the information that they need.

The study shows that the conventional corporatised and commoditised approach to after death practice contributes to some degree of stress for participants, particularly about financial affordability. It shows that contradictions exist for many participants between what they feel they must do to demonstrate respect and love for the deceased, what they can afford and what they actually may want given a broader range of choice. Many participants identify a sense of pressure to purchase the best funeral, so as to show how much they care, at the same time as expressing a discomfort and apprehension about this. Few people express awareness about what can be negotiated when organising a funeral, particularly in relation to more affordable options. There is some interest in funeral practices going 'greener', but there is far more interest in being able to choose what participants want in the ceremony and having a personal relationship with the funeral

practitioner. Participants in the study primarily say they are happy with traditional funeral services, but they had not previously thought about many other options until they were suggested within the context of the conversation. These include the waste of natural resources such as the wood used in coffins, the land needed for burial space and the impact of toxic chemicals used by the funeral home industry (Larkins, 2007). They also include the availability of different sorts of spaces for the ceremony, the contribution of family and friends to the ceremony, particularly in their ability to personally represent their deceased loved one.

## Recommendations

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1. This small mainly Illawarra region research study found that there is a need for more community information and education on after death practice rights and responsibilities. Funeral information needs to contain more detailed descriptions of specific services and the price of each option. A specific recommendation is that there is a need for practical printed material about the details involved in after death care. For example, a pamphlet containing details of maximum and minimum costs for funeral practices, legal requirements and a checklist of choices would be helpful. The implementation of strategies such as the pamphlet demystifies after death practices and assists mourners to identify what they consider to be important. It helps the bereaved in making informed choices and separating the issue of what's of value to them from issues of cost.
2. Another specific recommendation is for community forums or facilitated conversations to be conducted about after death care choices, including the chance to identify and chose what they want to happen in the funeral ceremony. Forums facilitate these conversations before someone dies. The study found that having the opportunity to think about after death care issues, before being faced with organising a funeral for loved one is most valuable. The outcomes of pre-death conversations are likely to be more carefully considered than those based on decisions made after death whilst mourning. Such conversations would also address the need to normalise death in a society that has sought to keep it at 'arms-length'.
3. There is a need to recognise and respond to the particular issues facing newly arrived immigrant and refugee communities in relation to after death practices. Currently these communities face problems in having their cultural beliefs and customs accommodated by the funeral industry in Australia. In addition, if these communities were better supported to be more knowledgeable and empowered they could meet their cultural traditions both within and outside the funeral industry. In turn this would open up more choice for all communities.
4. The institutionalisation of death places particular responsibilities on hospitals, nursing homes and aged care faculties, palliative care services and funeral homes to stay abreast of shifts in communities' needs and preferences in relation to after death care practices. Ideally these organisations should become leaders in facilitating the community's access to choice.

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