

Correspondence

Changing landscapes of death and burial practices: public health response in time of COVID-19 pandemic

ABSTRACT

In a recent correspondence published in this journal, the author calls for spiritual interventions for the living and the dead that be considered by the medical community especially in the time of COVID-19. This paper further elaborates on the need to consider the death and burial practices of bereaved families of patients who died of COVID-19 with strict observance of health protocols. Death and burial practices are significant moments in finding meaning for bereaved families in accepting the demise of their loved ones during this pandemic.

Keywords COVID-19, death, burial practices, public health

COVID-19 has affected people's ways of thinking and doing. The pandemic has claimed many lives, but one sad reality is that the bereaved family of the dead COVID-19 patients cannot even perform their usual and customary way of holding death and burial practices because of the health protocols. In a recent correspondence, the call for spiritual interventions for the living and the dead must be given with utmost attention among the medical community in the time of COVID-19 that has changed the lives of people around the world.¹ Part of the spiritual interventions is to hold death and burial practices with strict compliance with the health protocols against COVID-19. Consequently, the World Health Organization (WHO) has released guidelines for the safe burial of COVID-19-infected patients, which include the preparation of the body, wake and burial. The WHO cites that 'The dignity of the dead, their cultural and religious traditions, and their families should be respected and protected throughout'.²

Each religious denomination has its own ways of holding the wake. Death and burial practices are also avenues for religious experience and personality integration that can hone one's spirituality.³ However, the pandemic restrains the religious leaders to perform their death and burial rituals. For most religions, death is a passage to eternal life. Death and burial practices help the bereaved family members and friends to easily accept the death of their dearly departed.

In many religions and cultures, belief on the significance of holding wakes usually takes place for days to give ample time

for the family as well as the friends of the departed to grieve. It can be noted as well that physical distancing and limited number of individuals in the wake area must be observed. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed these practices because they are only given shorter time to hold wakes. Before the pandemic, only a few opted their departed to be cremated, but because of the pandemic, many had chosen and some were forced to let their departed to be cremated within 12 hours especially if the cause of death or suspected to be infected by COVID-19 because of government guidelines. All these considerations are meant to lower the risk of spreading COVID-19.

In conclusion, death and burial practices, as part of religious tradition, provide personal meaning-making because they remain significant ceremonial events that involve psychosocial–spiritual character.⁴

Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in this paper.

References

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