

Correspondence

COVID-19: the risks for funeral directors

The COVID-19 pandemic has already caused more than a 100 000 deceased worldwide, causing funeral directors to become overburdened. Consequently, some funeral homes are obliged to keep the deceased in refrigerated trucks until it is possible to bury or cremate them, or bodies are refused because of a shortage of capacity. Yet, to our knowledge, there are no studies currently being conducted on how this affects funeral directors. This is not surprising, as this group has seldom been studied in the past. This is unfortunate, firstly, because this group has been essential on every day of this crisis and secondly because there is cause for health concerns based on the few studies that have been conducted in the past. In this article, we wish to address the possible physical and mental health risks to funeral industry workers based on these few studies worldwide.

Firstly, there is a risk to physical health. Previous studies have shown that funeral directors run the risk of becoming infected when embalming a corpse. Often, they do not know the specific cause of someone's death (e.g. due to professional secrecy),¹ and at times they do not know the guidelines for treating corpses or follow them strictly.^{2,3} These dangers are especially important with regard to COVID-19, as the virus seems to be very contagious and can survive in dead bodies. Moreover, the guidelines have only recently been introduced and are still evolving.

Secondly, there is also a risk to mental health for funeral directors. Previous studies have shown that traumatic stress events,⁴ the number of funerals,⁵ the high demands of the job⁶ and overexposure to death during their work⁷ can all lead to a negative impact on funeral directors' mental health. Furthermore, funeral directors consider it an important aspect of their work to give the best possible emotional and practical support to family members of the deceased.⁵ The COVID-19 crisis is challenging in all these areas. The unusually high death rate during this crisis leads to an overexposure to death and funerals. In combination with the difficult working context due to strict security measures, it will substantially increase the demands of the job. Finally, there is the constant fear of being infected themselves.

Just as saving people is an essential task, so is burying and cremating people who could not be saved essential. There are different approaches to this crisis around the world, but we all wish to give proper respect to our dead and appropriate support to grieving relatives.

One day, this crisis will end. The mental health consequences will only become fully apparent when daily pressure is no longer enough to keep people going. It is our duty to be prepared to give the proper care, not only to our healthcare workers but also to funeral directors who have taken care of our deceased relatives, with risk for their own lives. More studies are necessary on funeral directors, and policymakers should take initiatives to support this often forgotten but essential group of caregivers.

Author contributions

RVO and JB have equal contributions.

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