

Fact Sheet

Disposal of human remains: procedures for exhumations and export authorisations

The first step in arranging an exhumation is to apply for an exhumation licence from the Attorney-General. To start this process, you should call the Attorney-General's Department on 08 7322 7012 and ask to speak to the exhumations officer.

Obtaining an exhumation licence

An application for an exhumation licence must be lodged with the Attorney-General by the family of the deceased, usually with the assistance of a funeral director.

Before a licence is issued by the Attorney-General, the relevant cemetery will be consulted. There is no specific timeframe on the process, as each application received by the Attorney-General's Department will vary depending on the complexity of circumstances.

If approved, copies of the exhumation licence are forwarded to the funeral director, the cemetery manager and Health Protection Programs (HPP) at the Department for Health and Wellbeing. It is a licence requirement that an officer from HPP attend the exhumation.



Notification and arrangement of the exhumation and re-interment

If an exhumation licence is approved, the funeral director or person who will perform the exhumation must complete and provide all relevant paperwork, and negotiate a date and time for the exhumation with HPP and the relevant cemetery. Negotiations with HPP should commence prior to the proposed exhumation date.

In some instances, particularly in regional areas, HPP may, at its discretion, request that a police officer or local environmental health officer attend on its behalf.

The following information and paperwork must be provided to HPP prior to the exhumation:

- > The current location of the deceased (i.e. name of cemetery, row, path, plot or lot no., section, vault no., crypt no.).
- > The new location for re-interment of the deceased (i.e. name of cemetery, row, path, plot or lot no., section, vault no., crypt no.).
- > A copy of the death certificate of the deceased.
- > The name of the deceased (ensure correct spelling).
- > The death and burial dates of the deceased.
- > The infectious disease status of the deceased.
- > The exhumation checklist.

Relatives and friends

The attendance of relatives and friends of the deceased at the exhumation is strongly discouraged and should only be permitted in exceptional circumstances, at the discretion of the cemetery manager.

The exhumation process may be emotionally distressing for relatives and friends of the deceased. Requests to attend the re-interment should be made through the funeral director.

Preparation of the site prior to the date

The cemetery staff can carry out preparatory work at the site prior to the date scheduled for the exhumation and re-interment, provided that the coffin or casket



is not opened and the human remains *not disturbed, handled, removed or exposed*. The site should be secured.

Procedures for the day of the exhumation

Identification of the deceased

Before the funeral director or the cemetery staff can commence the exhumation, the HPP officer will confirm the following:

- > The location of the deceased (e.g. row, path, plot or lot no., section, vault no., crypt no.) against cemetery records.
- > The deceased's name and death and burial dates on the headstone and nameplate (if intact) will be checked against the exhumation licence and funeral director records.

Removal of human remains

The following points must be considered, and where applicable, must be attended to.

- a) Ensure all bones, hair, teeth and any other materials relating to the human remains are removed and not left within the exhumation site.
- b) If the coffin or casket is not damaged, the human remains can remain within the original coffin or casket, unless the family has requested otherwise.
- c) Original coffins or caskets should be checked for any holes which may result in the emission of odours or leaking of liquid.
- d) If the human remains need to be transferred into a new coffin or casket, they can be transferred to a 100 micron impervious body bag and sealed. If a nameplate is not available, the same information otherwise provided on a nameplate, i.e. the name of the deceased and the date of death, must be replicated in some form onto new coffin or casket, ossuary box etc.
- e) Any excess water in gravesites or vaults which interferes with the removal of the human remains must be pumped to the surface and drained into an area where it can be safely and effectively absorbed into the ground. Such water must be treated with a disinfecting agent.
- f) Any remaining pieces of the coffin should be disposed of in an appropriate

manner, which may include the use of a cremator.

- g) All disposable protective clothing worn by the funeral director and/or cemetery staff must be disposed of in an appropriate manner. Heavily soiled or contaminated items must be incinerated or disposed of as medical waste, and any other non-visibly soiled or contaminated items bagged and disposed of into general waste.
- h) Prior to back filling, the grave must be thoroughly inspected to ensure that it is completely free of all materials associated with the burial of the deceased (e.g. clothing, flowers, coffin lining etc).
- i) Special procedures or considerations may be necessary as part of the exhumation process depending on the infectious disease status of the deceased. HPP will advise of these special circumstances.

The body and/or the coffin/casket containing the body to be exhumed ***shall not be disturbed, handled or removed from the grave*** until authorised by the attending HPP officer (or representative officer).

Re-interments

Re-interments do not generally need to be attended by the HPP officer (or representative officer). However, cemetery and site details must still be provided as previously detailed.

Reporting to Attorney-General's Department

HPP provides a report to the Attorney-General's Department advising of the completion and particulars of the exhumation and re-interment, and whether all due precautions for the preservation of public health were observed.

Work health and safety

It is the funeral director and the cemetery manager's responsibility to ensure that all employees comply with work health and safety (WHS) legislation. WHS policies may vary from business to business.

Exhumation costs

HPP attendance at exhumations is charged at an hourly rate. Current rates can be obtained by contacting HPP.

Exhumation licence, funeral director and cemetery charges will also apply.

Charges may apply if a police officer or local environmental health officer attends the exhumation on behalf of HPP.

There is no cost involved when lodging an exhumation application with the Attorney-General's Department.

Exhumed human remains being transported overseas

If the exhumed human remains are to be transported overseas, the following additional measures will need to be addressed:

- > All relevant paperwork must be finalised; including obtaining an export authorisation from SA Health.
- > All regulations and requirements of the airline and the country where the human remains are to be sent must be observed.
- > The human remains must be placed in a hermetically sealed container (e.g. a metal lined coffin) in accordance with international regulations and airline requirements.

If the exhumed remains are to be transported (overseas, site to site, or between cemeteries), they must be readily identifiable. As above, if a nameplate is not available, the same information otherwise provided on a nameplate must be replicated in some form on the transport container.

Obtaining an export authorisation

To export human remains overseas (and cremated remains, when required by the receiving country), an export authorisation is required. Contact Health Protection and Regulation Business Support by telephone on 8226 7100 to arrange an export authorisation. The following information will be requested:

- > A copy of the death certificate or Coroner's statement regarding the cause of death and place of death.
- > If the deceased was a Coroner's case, a copy of the Coroner's clearance, *Authority to dispose of human remains*.
- > Details of the person's residential address before the date of death.
- > Details of the city and country where the deceased is to be transported.
- > In some circumstances a statement from the forensic scientist or attending doctor that there were no infectious diseases involved in the death may be required.

Notification of approval of the export authorisation will usually be issued within 48 hours.

A fee for export authorisations is applicable – please check the current rates with HPP.

For more information

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