

Who is Your Funeral Director -Part 2

Who is your funeral director? Where do they come from? What is their expertise? What does the future hold for the industry and people who work in it? In previous blogs, I have written about my experience and what led me into the funeral industry. In this blog, I look at some of the changes in the industry in recent decades, giving you insight into who your funeral director might be and how they got into the industry.

There wouldn't be a day go by someone tells me I'm working in a "bulletproof" industry. They think that because everyone dies, there will always be work for me. It's not surprising that other people want to be part of what they too believe is a 'future proof" industry. So, as the industry draws in new people, questions arise as to who these people are, their qualifications and what they contribute to the industry as it changes over time?

The funeral industry has undergone a significant change in my lifetime. I grew up in a time when some funeral directors still manufactured coffins and caskets rather than purchased them from large manufacturers. Many staff came to the industry from the factory floors. Funerals were typically religious. The most significant difference between funerals was whether they were catholic or protestant. Burials were the main form of disposition. In the 1960s and 70s, with immigration beginning to shift from European countries to also include new arrivals from Asia, we began to see new religions appear. This diversity meant changes particularly in terms of ethnic customs and traditions. Funeral homes had to adapt quickly and most did so quite well.

At this time, few of our new Australians had the desire or will to work within the funeral industry. Over the following few decades, not much changed. Sure there are more new arrivals from a wider range of countries having different traditions and cultures to those we had become accustomed to. This has meant funeral staff have had to acquire a better understanding of the needs of our changing Australian industry and above all else, flexibility. The funeral industry was changing behind the scenes. Larger family businesses were absorbing traditional family-owned business. The centralisation of mortuaries and garaging enabled significant cost efficiencies. Much smaller family-owned business did not have family members wanting to carry on in the family business. Something not unique to other industries, but with 24 hour 7 day a week commitment, the funeral industry does not have the appeal of many others.

For those starting a career in the funeral industry, there was a hierarchal ascent. Similar to an apprenticeship but without the formality. Staff would begin as a hearse driver working alongside the most experienced member of the team, the conductor. Typically, conductors have years of experience and have undergone a similar "apprenticeship". Previously, there were very few women in these roles. Indeed there were few women in funeral service altogether.

After a few years working alongside a conductor, the hearse driver would progress to the coach driver, the third person in a funeral crew. The coach driver has the job of collecting and looking after the family on the day of the funeral. The coach driver would then become a conductor, and the cycle would begin again.

Funeral staff would be involved in the delivery of a diverse range of funerals, rosaries, viewing, and other services such as transfers of deceased or body collection from Nursing homes, hospitals or coroners, etc. All staff were required to be on rotational 24/7 after-hours standby for night work. When not doing funerals, staff were involved in coffin preparation, placing handles and writing names plates on coffins and sometimes lining them, there is always cleaning to be performed.

Vehicles are the funeral directors' mobile shop front, and most companies spent a lot of time ensuring there showpieces were kept immaculate. Companies varied as to how these processes worked. Some would insist that all conductors were also funeral arrangers while others found that some staff were better at funeral delivery than others.

The mortuary has always been a field on its own. Many funeral staff had no desire or will to work within the mortuary. Larger funeral homes typically had qualified mortuary personnel called embalmers. Smaller companies often had no qualified staff in the mortuary, and they may have had general funeral staff performing necessary mortuary procedures. Some of the larger funeral homes were big supporters of mortuary training and our family business at times had up to 12 or more qualified embalmers on staff. The training and encouragement to train staff have often been attributed to the principals or owners of the business. Those owners that had worked in mortuaries were more likely to encourage training than those that didn't.

The early embalmers in Australia had either learnt overseas or were part of the early learning with the British Institute of Embalmers. Some funeral homes paid for embalming courses and tuition for their staff. Sadly today this is often not the case, and students are typically required to pay out the hefty course fees on their own. Television shows such as CSI have probably attributed the large numbers of young women now working within our mortuaries.

The 1980s saw the introduction of the large foreign-owned companies become part of the Australian funeral industry, purchasing the larger family-owned groups. As a result, many companies that had often worked and helped each other out from time to time came to see themselves as

competitors. The mutual assistance of the past died overnight. Corporatisation had arrived and quickly permeated the market changing the culture of funeral service forever. The traditional family names of the business often remained but the founding principles of many of these businesses didn't.

The funeral industry, like many others, had moved into a financially driven market.

In the past, the staff knew their employers as well as they knew their own families. Instead, with corporatisation, staff would either change industries or change allegiances based on money. For some, this also appeared to be a lucrative time to enter the industry. Subsequently, we have seen a proliferation of small independent funeral operators enter the market. Some have a laptop, and that's it.

It is now possible to get trade services in mortuaries, deceased transfers, hire hearse and staff. While there are some excellent trade services around, there are also horror stories of sub-standard quality as the market is increasingly driven by price.

An industry that had once moved to the introduction of nationwide infection control standards often now seems more concerned with the length of time that training might take rather than the benefits these skills may bring. Subsequently, few workers within the industry have ever undertaken any form of training in industry-based occupational health and safety.

Many traditional operators have made calls for industry regulation and or licensing. This is not new, yet there never seems to be any consensus as to what needs to be regulated or how. Often these calls are based on minimum equipment and vehicle standards. It is difficult to find any evidence around the world that in the absence of any of these standards, any risk to public health exists. Often these calls are based on creating barriers to entry to increase start-up costs.

Some say their unscrupulous operators out there. No doubt there is. Yet, in highly regulated professions these unscrupulous operators still exit. So regulation won't stamp them out.

So who is your funeral director?

Funeral operators are calling themselves many things these days, the latest is a funeral event organiser. Indeed a person may call themselves a funeral director but never handle a deceased. Some of these people may have spent years or even decades in the industry but never had to dress or prepare a deceased. Many of us have heard of instances, where new consultants are given a case and told to see a grieving family on their first day of employment, no experience, no training and no knowledge.

A funeral is made of a broad range of services. Foremost the funeral director is engaged for the disposition of the deceased. For some funeral organisers, this is seen as a minor aspect of their services! Whilst there are many new services, such as catering, printed materials, audiovisual now on offer, we should not lose sight of the reasons a family would engage a funeral director in the first place.

So maybe its time to recognise funeral directors who are skilled qualified and experienced in all aspects of the funeral industry. Not all funeral directors are the same. Many have spent their life perfecting their skills and craft.

Maybe its time to recognise the "Master Undertaker" for their services.

So when you engage a funeral service next time, maybe you should ask a few questions?

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