

Roundtable

By Patti Martin Bartsche

Embalming and Preparation Arts

Roundtable



Lance Ray



Matthew Smith

For families, little is more important than that first viewing. How a loved one looks sets the tone for the entire funeral experience. We asked Lance Ray, executive vice president of sales for Pierce Chemical, and Matthew Smith, expert embalmer, restorative artist and consultant for Frigid Fluid Co., to share their thoughts on the state of preparation arts and embalming.

How important is a well-designed prep room for a funeral home?

Ray: It would be where I would spend a good deal of money. Ask yourself this ... Would you want your mom taken there? Or would you show it to a family member or clergy at an open house function?

Throughout my travels I have seen a number of prep rooms that resemble surgical suites, and they are truly stunning in appearance. Unfortunately, many times this is the room that gets left out in the building budget.

Smith: As if it were a room in the White House, "Room One" as referred to by my friend and

colleague, Jim Messer from Roseville, Minn., who believes that it should be the most important room in the funeral home.

As an embalmer that works in several different prep rooms, I can say a well-designed prep room makes all the difference in the world. It should be large enough to handle your busiest day with ease. A spacious prep room is a safer prep room. Small rooms require tight maneuvers, which can cause feet to slip when floors get wet. Small areas also make it difficult to maneuver bodies and caskets. Lighting is paramount. Ceiling fluorescent lights should be a part of the design.

The flow of the room should be

considered. Where bodies are stored versus where they are prepared versus where they are dressed and casketed.

Both a dressing and cosmetics room is a luxury enjoyed by few. Cupboard space seems to go for a premium and countertops seem sparse. Have a room well ventilated with plenty of space to move around along with countertop space, and you will find a more organized and most certainly a happy embalmer.

How can a funeral home make its prep room the best it can be?

Smith: Stocking the shelves with all the essential fluids is a must. Some states limit the quantity of chemicals allowed on the shelves, but aside from that there should be plenty of arterial supplemental and cavity fluids to properly embalm a variety of bodies. Co-injection and supplemental fluids should be ready and on hand for when the need arises. Because of all the potential diseases, viruses and bacteria that can accompany dead human remains, universal precautions should always be available and used.

Ray: Make it a comfortable and safe place where you or your staff will want to spend time. Great lighting, ventilation and body lifts are at the top on my list. A new feature I am starting to see in prep

rooms is flat-screen televisions and surround-sound systems. Embalmers say it makes them spend more time in the prep room and thus more time is spent caring for the appearance of the deceased.

How have embalming techniques changed in the last five years?

Smith: Sadly, not much has changed in 50 years, let alone the last five. I have traveled throughout the U.S. and to different parts of the world training embalmers on personal techniques I've picked up over the years. There is a hunger for more information.

I would like to see more focus placed on setting features and feature building, post embalming. I don't think techniques have changed, but I believe the bodies are changing and we aren't keeping up.

Ray: Actually, I don't think the techniques have changed much in 50 years. However, I do feel more advanced chemicals are required to properly embalm remains today.

For families, that first viewing is all-important. How can embalmers make that experience the least traumatizing for families?

Ray: First, I feel a well-embalmed body is the most important. The more you can do internally with fluid, the less cosmetics are needed giving a more natural, lifelike appearance and feel. A body does not have to be rigid to be embalmed.

Second, spend more time setting the features. This aspect of embalming is truly an art. Finally, take time to detail the body: clean fingernails, trim hairs (ears, nose and eyebrows) and build features not only in the face but the hands. These can all make the experience less traumatic.

Smith: When all the chips are on the table the only thing that matters to your client family is what's resting on the pillow. Notice the next time you take a family in for the first viewing what they are focused on. It's not the crystal chandelier or the new furniture. It's the body of their loved one. If the body doesn't look good then all the other stuff is irrelevant.

I've interviewed unsuspecting people, asking if they wanted a "traditional" funeral for themselves. The overwhelming response is "Nah, I don't like all that make-up you guys use" or "You never make them look natural." Most reply with "just cremate me or stuff me in an old pine box and call it good."

Our workmanship as embalmers is vital to the longevity of the "traditional funeral." Focus on body presentation. See with your eyes, and listen to others about how the decedent looks. Seek outside training from those that are considered leaders in the art of embalming and cosmetic restoration. Without a body present, a memorial will become the new "traditional funeral."

What are the biggest challenges facing embalmers?

Smith: Arguably *we* are our biggest challenge. Communication between the arranger and embalmer many times is nonexistent. In the day of weekends off and 9-to-5'ers, it is very commonplace to have one (person) meeting with the family while another is embalming and yet another is bringing the family in for first viewing and directing the funeral. Therefore communication with the embalmer is a must. There is nothing more challenging for an embalmer than when the arranging director brings that suit that is 100 pounds too small for the man full of

edema. An arranger should *never* promise the client family *anything* until consulting with the embalmer.

Ray: Drugs – both prescription and street! Attempting to embalm a body with a strong alkaline pH can neutralize embalming fluid. The body's pH levels are altered to the point that using a preinjection chemical is no longer an option but a necessity. Modern preinjection chemicals such as Pierce One Point contain buffers that alter the pH of bodies to a neutral condition allowing the embalming chemicals to work as chemically designed.

What trends are you seeing in the industry?

Ray: I am seeing funeral homes starting to use professional trade services or centralized prep centers for more services. With more families opting for cremation, I see more funeral home owners opting to use a trade service instead of hiring full-time embalmers in the future.

Smith: In talks with younger embalmers, I've heard that they feel stuck or pushed down in the dungeon (prep room). I can't count the number of apprentices, students and newly licensed embalmers that are left in the prep room to fend for themselves.

This will surely drive families towards immediate disposal, because who wants to see Mom look worse in her casket than she did dying in the hospital bed? We are either serving our families or we are serving ourselves. We need to ask ourselves, "What is the most important thing to this family – my funeral home and what I have to offer, or their loved one?" The answer is "their loved one." With the question answered we must ask, "Is what's important to them just as important to me?" It's time we get honest with ourselves. •