

Submission
No 18

INQUIRY INTO FUNERAL INDUSTRY

Organisation: Omar Mosque Committee

Name: Dr Munir Hussain

Position: President

Telephone:

Date Received: 25/05/2005

Theme:

Summary

WOLLONGONG ISLAMIC SOCIETY's

OMAR MOSQUE COMMITTEE

(in affiliation with)
AUSTRALIAN ISLAMIC EDUCATION BOARD INC.

9 FOLEY STREET, GWYNNEVILLE, WOLLONGONG NSW 2500, AUSTRALIA. Phone/Fax: (02) 4225 1962

25 May 2005.

Hon Ms Jan Burnswoods MLC
Committee Chair
Standing Committee on Social Issues
- Inquiry into the Funeral Industry
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

Dear Madam,

Re: **INQUIRY INTO THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY**

I am directed to forward the attached SUBMISSION on the above-mentioned Inquiry to your learned Standing Committee for its due consideration.

The paper has been prepared by our Omar Mosque Committee. It is based on our experiences with funeral/burial services among Muslims in the Wollongong area.

We shall eagerly await the report of the Standing Committee in due course.

Yours truly,



M. A. Sahib
Secretary

A SUBMISSION
to the
STANDING COMMITTEE ON SOCIAL ISSUES
of the
LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL of NEW SOUTH WALES GOVERNMENT
on
INQUIRY INTO THE FUNERAL INDUSTRY

from
OMAR MOSQUE COMMITTEE of WOLLONGONG ISLAMIC SOCIETY
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1. This submission is based on our experiences gained from organizing, arranging and participating in funeral/burial services according to Islamic rites and practices for Muslims of the greater Wollongong area over the past two decades.
2. It is safe and reasonable to assume that the fast rising costs of funeral and internment of a deceased person have prompted this Inquiry. During the past seven to eight years the costs have grown by over 70 percent. Given that immigration has been the principal source of Muslims in the region, their demographic structure would significantly influence Muslim families as the first generation of migrants phases away, leaving the next generation to arrange for the increasing funeral/burial costs while at the same time raising their own families. Not all Muslim families are equally or sufficiently endowed.
3. This paper thus concentrates mainly on cost aspects of Item 1(a) of the Terms of Reference, i.e. that the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into and report on the funeral industry and in particular on

“...(a) changes in the funeral industry over the past decade including the cost of funerals, the degree of competition, vertical integration and ownership ...”

Other sub-items (b) to (f) are only briefly alluded to by implication, since they are related more to administrative and political aspects of the funeral industry, which are the domains of State and Local governments.

Islamic Rites and Practices

4. When a Muslim person dies there are certain rites and practices that need to be observed. These are elaborated below, as well as how they are being achieved.

Interment

5. According to the Koran and the teachings of the Prophet, when a Muslim dies it is obligatory on relatives, friends and the society at large to bury the deceased as soon as practicable. It is accepted that this may not always happen, given the weekend breaks or the need for a Coroner's intervention.

6 Organizing funerals during weekends is unavoidably more expensive. Our society is learning to live with this fact, always hoping that costs could somehow be reasonably minimized.

7. With regard to Coroner inquiries our hope is that it could be undertaken as expeditiously as possible. Some helpful suggestions in this regard have come from our discussions with the Wollongong City Council, and through it, with other State authorities. One suggestion so far was that of approaching the rostered Coroner on duty at a Sydney Court when the local Coroner was constrained by his/her work load. Hopefully this could be pursued further and implemented in due course, although here too there are additional cost implications.

Preparation for burial

8. The body of the deceased Muslim has to be washed and wrapped in a shroud of clean white sheets. There being no Muslim undertaker locally in Wollongong, who would normally be conversant with the ritual washing, we convinced a couple of non-Muslim undertakers do create facilities in their parlors, where our knowledgeable individuals and/or Imams of two Mosques in Wollongong could perform the ritual washing. This is working well so far. An offer by a Muslim undertaker from Sydney to provide the entire funeral service, including the washing of the body at his Sydney parlor, was not regarded with much favour by local Muslims because of inconveniences involved for the relatives and friends of the deceased.

Burial

9. Although the body of an expired Muslim is required to be carried in a coffin to the graveside, it is not buried in the coffin. The body shrouded in layers of white sheets is laid on the earth floor as per the axiom of "...dust to dust" espoused by world's major monotheistic religions. The coffin is then dismantled and placed within the grave prior to commencement of backfilling.

Grave

10. The grave is of the standard size stipulated by the authorities. A hardwood frame, assembled to fit inside the grave, is placed at the bottom of the grave around the body. Hardwood timber slats are then arranged on the frame, thereby creating a chamber. Backfilling then commences above the chamber.

11. The procedures described in paragraphs 9 and 10 above were approved by the South Eastern Sydney Public Health Unit vide its letter dated 21 November 1998.

12. We are aware that in one State of Australia (there could well be others), special cement slabs have been approved for the chamber. These slabs are strong in structure but light in weight (for easy handling presumably), and possibly cheaper too. Hopefully New South Wales too would some day soon introduce this technology, thereby reducing burial costs. Importantly such slabs would save national forests.

Coffin

13. Currently the undertakers use particleboard coffins, which until recently cost around \$290 each. We have been looking into substituting these with fewer re-useable coffins made of light metal(s). After use each time these metal coffins would need to be "...returned to the undertakers for steam cleaning and sanitation", as stipulated in the South Eastern Sydney Public Health Unit letter (op.cit.). Without doubt re-usable coffins would appreciably reduce burial costs to the bereaved family.

Inflationary Trends

14. That the cost of funeral/burial services has been rising significantly in recent years cannot be refuted. Increases have occurred not only for undertakers' services and facilities but also for Councils' charges.

15. Some statistics gleaned from the scanty records we have for weekday funeral/burial charges reveal the following:

<u>Undertaker's Charges</u>	<u>Aug 1997 (Actual)</u>	<u>Feb 2005 (Quote)</u>
Undertaker fee for services	\$990.00	\$1990.00
Particleboard coffin	290.00	500.00
Transfer of deceased	145.00	450.00
Muslim Washers	100.00	150.00
Timber Frame & Slats	75.00	275.00
<u>WCC Cemetery Fee</u>		
Site)	?	666.00
Grave digging)	?	824.00
Plaque)	?	364.00
Total WCC	1160.00	1854.00
<u>Composite Cost</u>	\$2951.00	\$5135.00

16. Itemized comparison of Undertaker items given in the table above could be spurious because they appear to be not consistent in contents and coverage. For example the February 2005 quote could contain new or additional costs and/or some re-allocation of costs among the items. Incidentally the figures for the two periods are from one and the same undertaker.

17. With regard to Wollongong City Council Cemetery Fee, a breakdown by items for August 1997 was not available in our records. However, the totals do indicate the rise, i.e. by 59.8 per cent.

18. The rising trend is further obvious from the bottom line. For instance the composite cost for funeral/burial services incurred by a family for its deceased member was \$2,951.00 in August 1997. Seven and a half year later, in 2005, the same undertaker quoted the composite charge of \$5,135.00, i.e. 74.0 pre cent higher.

19. There is virtually no escape from these rising costs, and they could overwhelm many immediate families and relatives especially during their time of bereavement. Sparsely-resourced relatives abandoning their dead to the administrative authorities for internment becomes a distinct possibility. Religious rites would then become scarcely feasible.

20. Our society is aware of such eventualities. We are working towards alleviating them on a case-by-case basis, when needs arise.


Liaison with Local Councils/Authorities

21. Our experiences over the past decade suggest that regular meetings and negotiations with Wollongong City Council, and through it with officials/representatives of relevant NSW Government Departments, have contributed to the viable working relationship with mutual benefits. In the greater Sydney area such cooperation between authorities and Muslim groups must be extant since some time. However, it might not be so elsewhere in the State where smaller Councils operate among fewer

resident Muslim population. Lessons from our dealings might well benefit both parties. Alternatively, smaller Councils might wish to consult and/or seek advice from Wollongong City Council when issues concerning Islamic funeral/burial rites and procedures arise.

Appearance before Standing Committee

22. We are grateful to have had this opportunity to submit our views to the Standing Committee. Should it be so desired, a small group of 2 or 3 selected representatives from Omar Mosque Committee would be happy to appear before the Standing Committee.


for, Dr. Munir Hussain
President
Omar Mosque Committee

Dated: 25 May 2005.