

**Submission
No 46**

INQUIRY INTO FUNERAL INDUSTRY

Organisation: The Natural Death Centre

Name: Mr Zenith Virago

Telephone:

Date Received: 1/07/2005

Theme:

Summary

ZENITH VIRAGO, CMC. JP.

The Natural Death Centre,

Funeral Consultant, Educator & Celebrant,

P.O. BOX 349, BYRON BAY, NSW, 2481

02 66 848154 0427 924 310

zenith@linknet.com.au

June 2005

To the Standing Committee on Social Issues,

A submission into the Inquiry on Funeral Industry in NSW.

Greetings. I am a Funeral Celebrant, Consultant and Educator, working in Byron Bay, and surrounds, Northern NSW. I have done this professionally for the past 11 years. I often work with the dying person themselves & their family, or the family when the death has occurred.

I am also a part of a home based Amitayus Hospice service, based in Mullumbimby, which assists the primary carer to support their loved one to die in the comfort of their own home. I advise, and am one of the trainers for their volunteers carers.

My submission is driven by the need to allow for suitable options within the Funeral process and Industry, so that the public are given reasonable access and information to farewell their loved one in an appropriate and meaningful way.

Many people are not fearful, and are accepting of the cycle of life and death, and want to be involved in ways that allow for an honoring of their loved one, that befits the deceased and comforts the bereaved. These changes have been community driven, and have been totally beneficial.

As part of my work I am familiar with the current Legislation, procedure, requirements and legal documentation for both Burial and the Cremation, I have a working relationship with Funeral parlours and the council owned Lismore Crematorium and Cemetery.

a) Changes in the funeral industry over the past decade including the cost of funerals, the degree of competition, vertical integration and ownership:

Over the past 10 years, things have only changed for the better here! The North Coast is a great place to live, but it is also a great place to die.

As part of a more natural and accepting approach to death and dying, there has been a movement on here and indeed Internationally, to "reclaim death". This has allowed many families to feel a greater sense of control and satisfaction during the process, and afterwards in their reflection.

Just as birth was reclaimed in the 80's, and many of those ideas and procedures were embraced by the mainstream hospital system for better birthing, such are the attitudes to here to death and dying, and simply being more involved in the funeral process.

It is clear that this all makes for a more meaningful and appropriate ceremony, and an easier journey into their individual grieving process. This in turn, offers a sense of honoring and satisfaction, which in turn long term benefits to those left behind.

Being involved in the process: There are a range of ways in which people are empowering themselves in this process, whilst still working with Funeral Directors, but it is dependent on service providers being open, honest and giving options, with information and what is possible and allowing them to make appropriate choices.

On the North Coast, people are choosing to work with the Funeral Directors in such ways as:

- Building their own coffin to the required specifications,
- Decorating it with photos and farewells,
- Choosing to wash and dress the body themselves,
- Taking the body home, for a last farewell,
- Driving the body to the ceremony themselves in their familiar family vehicle,
- Digging the grave themselves and burying on Private property,

All of these steps are allowed by current legislation, and are beneficial to the bereaved in their sense of ownership and their grieving process, It is vital that these opportunities are not lost in any tightening of legislation. As is the option to 'do it yourself' without a Funeral Director.

I would like to refer you to the website <http://www.naturaldeath.org.uk> which is an organization in the UK which is leading the way in a more natural and accepting attitude to death. That approach is not for everyone, but needs to be available to those that want to be more involved, and who do not want to be disempowered or ripped off. There may be information there that will assist you in this Inquiry.

Cardboard and other alternative coffins: In many countries, UK, Japan, Germany for example, the use of cardboard coffins is absolutely standard. They have a high population and little timber, we have the opposite. I have visited sites in the UK, private and local council owned, where they sell cardboard coffins for 100 sterling, they are patented, manufactured and very popular, and are used by a broad cross section of the communities there.

I recently just cremated my mother in the UK, in a woven bamboo coffin, with no plastic lining, purchased from the mainstream Funeral director, and again standard procedure. They have no issues with cardboard or more organic coffins.

I purchased several cardboard coffins, and also have had some manufactured here in NSW, all meeting the standards, and have used these for burial and cremation in this area. Some Funeral Directors, and the Manager of the Lismore Crematorium, worked within the regulations and were completely satisfied that all due process was met.

I submit that the resistance from the Funeral Industry and the 'furphies' they are putting up, are based in the knowledge that there is often a 600% or more, mark up on coffins at the moment, and that they will not be able to do that by offering a cheaper option like cardboard.

b) the availability and affordability of burial spaces and options for increasing the supply of spaces

Vertical interment: Many people in rural areas want to follow the European examples of Woodland Burials, where the body is buried in a vertical position, and a commemorative tree planted on top of the grave. I am involved in trying to develop this sort of burial here on the north coast as a response to many community driven requests.

As part of a world wide environmental and space problem, many countries are now taking to Woodland Burials. This also provides reforestation to treeless land or land which may have been degraded by farming procedures.

Most of these are private cemeteries on land that doesn't have building parcels or are not desirable for dwellings. This increases the availability and affordability as vertical interment means that they consume less space.

Just as this is an option in some other cultures, this should also be an option here, as an alternative to the current standard of the horizontal position.

f) the adequacy of legislation in meeting community needs

It is my experience that if Funeral directors are sensitive, honest and caring, and carry out their business with integrity and compassion, as a minority does, the regulations are adequate for protection the public. A tightening up without the provision for doing it yourself, or a combined approach would be a backward step. Over regulation is often

thought to be an answer to a problem, but we have the opportunity to also be innovative and forward thinking allowing for a more open approach.

It is my absolute experience that once people who want more, are given options and understanding around death and Funerals they accept the benefits and want to be involved. This is especially important for children.

I am happy to refer you to many bereaved families who would share their experiences, and who support this submission.

I am absolutely available to you for further consultation on this matter, and the provision of further information, photos, stories of what is happening here on the North Coast.

Please do not hesitate to contact me.

Warm Regards,

Zenith Virago.

1. That the Standing Committee on Social Issues inquire into and report on the funeral industry and in particular:

- (a) changes in the funeral industry over the past decade including the cost of funerals, the degree of competition, vertical integration and ownership,
- (b) the availability and affordability of burial spaces and options for increasing the supply of spaces,
- (c) the adequacy of existing regulation of the funeral industry to protect consumers, public health and employees,
- (d) the role and structure of the Funeral Industry Council,
- (e) the adequacy of legislation in meeting community needs, and
- (f) any other relevant matter.