

## Covid-19's impact on death, families and funeral arrangements



We are all experiencing uncertainty and anxiety with the onslaught of the Corona virus pandemic, including Covid-19's impact on death, families and funeral arrangements.

Governments have taken extreme measures around the world to reduce transmission and this is having a devastating impact on our economy, our family life and our society.

Even when Covid-19 is not the cause of death, how you arrange and plan a loved one's funeral is impacted by Covid-19.

These are some of the regulations South African authorities have put in place that should be considered if you are planning or arranging a funeral or a memorial for a loved one:

## Changes to patient visitation protocols

---

Covid-19's impact on death, families and funeral arrangements will be felt even before a death occurs. Hospitals, nursing homes, retirement villages and frail care centres have all implemented strict access control systems and are curtailing family visits. They are tightening visiting hours and changing the rules governing visitors. This is very traumatic for both the patient and the family, especially when a patient dies in hospital without their family at their bedside.

Patients who are infected with Covid-19 are quarantined and have extremely limited access to their family members.

Families should decide in advance who will be at the patient's bedside and should write down last words and messages for their loved one, especially when death is imminent. We suggest you use technology to share personal

messages of love and support or have live video chats (if cell phones are allowed into the ward).

Find new ways to be present for your loved ones, but prepare for a changed reality.

## Changes to reporting, care and other precautions

---

Funeral undertakers are usually contacted by nursing staff or family members once a person has passed on and are asked to transfer the deceased to a private mortuary.

With Covid-19, there are additional precautions that need to be taken when handling the deceased, which increases funeral costs. The following guidelines were issued by the NICD (National Institute for Communicable Diseases):

- Placing the deceased in a triple protective bag (two layers must be transparent and may not be opened neither for the purposes of viewing nor for washing).
- The deceased is considered contagious and may only be kept in designated mortuaries.
- The deceased may not be handled directly whether for the purposes of washing, aesthetic or other cultural or religious reasons.
- Cremation is strongly advised by the NICD.

Environmental Health Guidelines published by the Department of Health provide guidance to funeral undertakers and mortuary staff, as follows:

*“Once in the hospital or private mortuary, it would be acceptable to open the body bag for family viewing only (mortuary attendant to wear full PPE). Family to be provided with mask and gloves for the viewing and the family should not kiss the body;”*

*and*

*“Washing or preparing the body is acceptable if those carrying out the task wear PPE.”*

The deceased is to be placed in a coffin and transported by the undertaker directly to the crematorium or burial site and may not be taken to a place of worship or to a private home for purposes of a vigil.

Another significant consequence of Covid-19 is the delays that will be experienced when registering deaths and obtaining burial orders at the Department of Home Affairs. DHA capacity has been affected and the precautionary measures government has taken to protect their staff makes obtaining documentation that much harder. DHA offices have implemented strict access controls, only allowing a limited number of people to enter at any one time.

## Impact on funeral or memorial arrangements

---

Covid-19 regulations will be felt most by families when arranging funeral or memorial services.

Regulations promulgated by the Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs have limited the number of people attending funerals and/or memorial service to no more than 100 people. It is important to note that should the family opt for a venue which has been issued with a liquor licence, the number of people attending is restricted to 50, staff included. The funeral group must advise families accordingly and it is suggested that attendance should be by invitation only.

Gauteng Premier [David Makhura](#), addressing the media, included a requirement that residents of Gauteng must notify police of a wedding or funeral that they might be planning. “Everyone who is applying for a funeral or for a wedding needs to do so at the nearest police station in your area who are helping to monitor the size of these events ensuring they comply with the law,” said Makhura.

Please Covid-19’s impact on death, families and funeral arrangements [download a template](#) of the notification letter (to be printed in duplicate for a signature and stamp) to hand to the nearest SA Police Services (SAPS). SAPS keep a copy and the original is handed to the church or venue office.

No coffin may be present at the funeral service (when the death was Covid-19 related). No coffin may be taken to a private dwelling for night vigils or other ceremonies and viewings are only permitted under controlled conditions. If cremation is not chosen, the family needs to provide a motivation for their decision, as per NICD’s guidelines.

These changes call for a creative response. Friends and family who are unable to be present at a service can still participate in the celebration by using technology such as live streaming and recording of the funeral or

memorial. Some churches have already implemented a no-coffin-at-service policy, and others have adopted a no-refreshments approach. A few churches have announced a complete lockdown.

## Changes to the grieving process

---

The forced isolation and separation from a loved one, both before and after death, will cause pain and exacerbate the grief experienced by family members (see this [related link](#)). It is likely that family members will require more support and counselling to deal with this type of grief and trauma. The usual rituals and ceremonies that help us deal with death and grief are being adapted overnight to cater for the restrictions imposed by Covid-19. We all need to learn new methods of coping with grief and loss and need to look out for one another as we navigate our way through this unwelcomed reality.