



FOR THE SAFETY OF THE EMBALMER

By Duncan Todd, A.I.A.

Aside from skill and caring attention to the decedent, what can be more important in the preparation room than concern for the health, life and safety of the embalmer whose profession makes him or her vulnerable to serious health issues arising from frequent exposure to toxic fumes and other pathogens?

To address embalmer safety in the preparation room, four major areas of responsibility are prominent:

- Air quality
- Emergency safety equipment
- Protective clothing
- Sanitary and well-maintained facilities

In addition to the four categories listed above, it is a given that proper employee training and licensure in the art of embalming be in place and that complete, properly functioning, and sanitary instrument sets and other embalming tools be provided.

First and foremost in embalming room safety is a safe, effective and OSHA-compliant ventilating system. All funeral home owners/directors should be familiar with the OSHA standard 1910-1048 regarding measurements of formaldehyde in the airstream, so it will not be discussed in detail except to call attention to the requirement. In terms of addressing air quality in the preparation room, the NFDA has recently published a landmark study titled "Formaldehyde Vapor Reduction in the Funeral Home Preparation Room." The report cites studies linking cancer to the use of formaldehyde in the embalming process. The NFDA paper, which should be required reading for every funeral home

owner and funeral director, states: "Effective ventilation is considered the most critical factor in reducing formaldehyde exposure."

The NFDA study stresses a new recommendation for ensuring adequate ventilation in the embalming room. Specifically, the report urges all facilities "to employ a local exhaust ventilation (LEV) system for added capture of formaldehyde emissions." An LEV device extracts formaldehyde vapors from a localized area to prevent fumes from entering the breathing zone of the embalmer and works in concert with a general preparation room exhaust system.

As testament to the effectiveness of LEV systems, Enrico T. Caruso, Jr., CSFP, owner and manager of South Jersey Funeral Associates, Inc., Pennsauken, New Jersey, has this to say about his newly installed device:

"Our general HVAC system does turn air over quite frequently, but this (new LEV) device eliminates my concern over what I call 'formaldehyde bursts' at the point of injection. It also eliminates exposure from other potential formaldehyde bursts such as when gravity injecting the abdominal wall and thoracic cavities...

it helps provide additional protection when the technician is working near any formaldehyde or pre/post embalming chemicals." Undoubtedly, air quality ranks as number one among Best Management Practices to be employed in the safe embalming room. Following air quality, properly installed and functioning safety devices are the embalmer's next line of defense in health protection.

The American National Standards Institute (ANSI) standard ANSI Z358.1-2009 oversees safety devices in the preparation room. The standard requires systems for emergency treatment of the eyes or body of persons exposed to injurious materials. In the context of prep rooms, embalmers should be protected by a properly installed and operating eyewash and overhead drench shower. These standards exist specifically for the protection of the embalmer and staff, and the devices should always be kept in proper working order. All employees should be trained in the proper use of the devices and the ANSI standard requires weekly testing to assure proper functioning.

The availability and widespread use of disposable gowns, gloves and shoe protection by today's embalmers is well established and will not be discussed at length here. Please

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consult your funeral supply provider with specific questions about the compliant products available for employee protection.

Finally, all other efforts to maintain a safe workplace in the embalming room can be moot if the overall facility is not constructed, equipped and maintained in a sanitary manner. To one degree or another, every state agency regulating funeral homes has specific requirements for ongoing sanitation of preparation

rooms, from allowed construction materials to daily cleaning requirements. In essence, all surfaces must be of a non-porous material, have a washable finish, and be cleaned and disinfected after each use of the room and its equipment.

By focusing attention on these four basic areas: air quality, emergency safety equipment, protective clothing, and sanitary and well-maintained facilities, any funeral home can proudly state that the health, life and safety of its embalmers is its highest priority. By establishing these priorities in writing through a system of guidelines and BMPs, the establishment can further uphold a commitment and provide valuable guidance and training to the staff. *MM*

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