

Is Your Funeral Home Protected From Your Preparation Room?

By Marjori Todd

You established your funeral home to serve your community. As an integral part of that mission, you built a preparation room within the building. Did you know, however, that an often overlooked element in construction can wreak havoc in your facility, exposing your staff and your families to dangerous health conditions and your business to costly liability suits?

We are speaking about the potential for backflow from water serving the embalming room. Without proper safeguards, this backflow can enter the plumbing system that serves the public areas of the building. Thus, the kitchen, drinking fountains and lavatories can be exposed to toxic chemicals and compounds used in the preparation room, resulting in serious health hazards.

Potable (drinkable) and Non-Potable Water

OSHA Sanitation Standard 1926.51 states that there shall be no cross-connection, open or potential, between a system furnishing potable water and a system furnishing non-potable water.

A cross-connection is defined by the environmental protection agency as “any actual or potential connection between the public water supply and a source of contamination or pollution.”

There are plumbing cross-connections in the funeral home that if not properly protected can allow a link between toxic liquids in the prep room and a potable water supply in the entire facility.

A cross-connection can happen when there is a reversal in the flow of water from the plumbing lines connected to the non-potable sources in the prep room into other parts of the funeral home. This condition is termed backflow. Back siphonage, where water backs up into a pipe, is one type of backflow.

Public health officials have documented cases that illustrate how cross-connections have compromised the water quality in a funeral home. In one case we have been made aware of, contamination was caused by a combination of low water pressure in conjunction with the simultaneous use of the aspirator.

Protecting Your Facility

Funeral home owners must assure that their contractors protect the facility from unsafe plumbing conditions. They



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can do so by installing a fixture known as a reduced pressure backflow preventer. A reduced pressure backflow preventer is a safety device used to control and protect plumbing lines from contaminating and polluting potable water supplies. It consists of two in-line independent check valves with an intermediate relief valve.

Reduced pressure backflow preventers come in a range of sizes and can be installed by any licensed master plumber. It is important to select products that are designed for protection from health hazard cross-connections.



Clearing Up a Misconception

One area of confusion for many funeral home owners is the fact that almost every facility already has a backflow preventer on the main water line going into the funeral home. Be aware, though — these preventers do not protect the funeral home from activities in the preparation room. This commonly existing backflow prevention device is protecting the funeral home water line from reversing back into the city water line.

Our company advises that reduced pressure backflow preventers be installed on the preparation room hot and cold water lines that serve foot-end equipment such as table waste and water service. Most code compliance officials will require that backflow preventers be installed. Even if not mandated, funeral directors would be wise to install these devices as a safety measure if embalming procedures are performed in the facility.

Installation

The backflow preventer must be installed in compliance with local codes, including proper venting and height above ground. The assembly should be located in an accessible location to facilitate testing and servicing. Testing and inspection should be made periodically, but at least once a year to ensure proper operation. Local codes may require testing every six months.

Our company recommends that a strainer be installed ahead of the assembly to protect the internal components from fouling. Pipelines must be thoroughly flushed prior to initial operation to eliminate dirt and pipe compounds. Insufficient flushing can clog the valve. Discharge from the relief valve indicates that the first check valve was fouled and would need to be cleaned.

Liability Issues

As mentioned earlier, there are dangers lurking in this issue, not the least of which is financial liability for consequences of backflow insurance settlements. Once pipes and water reach private property, the owner of that property is often responsible for the piping and water quality. Backflow can exist for many years before it is detected. Older funeral



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homes that were built before existing health guards were instituted may be susceptible to backflow problems without the owner's knowledge.

A word to the wise: it would be prudent for funeral directors planning to construct or renovate their facilities to give serious attention to this often ignored plumbing process. *MT*

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