



VIEWING THE BODY

*Should you view the dead body of the person you love?
Many of us will face this dilemma at some point in our lives,
and there is no right answer.*

ARTICLE BY GEORGIE VESTEY

When sudden death strikes, it can be difficult to accept the person we love is dead. Visual confirmation can help bring that realisation home which in turn may help our grieving process.

It helped my close friend Caroline. Her partner was murdered in Indonesia and died in her arms on the way to the hospital. "I stayed with him for several hours after he died and it was sort of wonderful, I just didn't want to leave him really.

I actually wanted to take the body back home which sounds ridiculous now," she says almost apologetically. "And that was the hardest thing, leaving him at the morgue. It was just hideous."

I ask her if it is something she would advise others to do? "Yes, definitely. I think it's a really, really important part of accepting the departure of someone. Whether it's your husband or

partner because it makes it very real, otherwise you're always wondering."

But what is the view of professionals who work with death? Lou Pye, a former police Family Liaison Officer, supports families like Caroline's after the murder of someone they love. She's often asked by the next of kin if they should view the body.

"I think it's very important that we never tell a family what to do. My answer will always be 'I can't answer that'. What I can do is tell you what to expect. I can go and look first.

I can then come out and tell you exactly what you'll see, including the injuries to the body or what the temperature of the room is, but it has to be your choice." However, in her experience, families are usually grateful they have seen the body however distressing it may be at the time.

However, if we are properly prepared, it can be very helpful. This view is shared by Karen and Bob, who work for a Coroner in the South of England. An important part of their role is accompanying families to the local mortuary to view their relative after sudden death. "It's nothing like you see on the telly and that's what we need to get across to families," says Karen.

The credit for this goes to the mortuary staff who are the professionals who prepare the body for viewing. They take great pride in making the person look as presentable as possible. As Bob says, "They are absolutely amazing with what they can do. The deceased will be presented on the bed as if they're asleep under the covers, head on a pillow in a softly lit room."

The family can either look through the glass or they can come in and sit with their loved one. They can hold a hand if possible, give them a kiss on the head if possible. It's done in a very, very human and personal way."

But what about when bodies are badly 'disrupted,' (insider speak for 'badly damaged') or in an advanced state of decomposition? It depends on the circumstances.

For funeral director, Andy Holter, it is one of the most delicate tasks he faces. "You've got to be really diplomatic but also very sensitive to saying actually there was a period when you could have viewed the body but that time has passed. Nature has taken its course and our suggestion would be that you remember your loved one as you last saw them. However, we would never stop anybody if they really, really, really, really want to see them."

So how do they overcome this in the least traumatic way possible? Andy says, "One of the ways is to suggest we do a sealed coffin where the family can come in and have some time alone. They can leave us a letter that we can place in the coffin or we might just leave a hand showing so they can hold the hand. It's a very fine line but it's about doing what's best for the family."

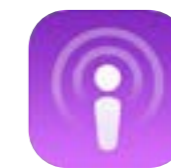
What impact does witnessing this interaction have on the professionals involved? For Coroner's Officer, Karen, it is not as bad as she feared. "I always thought that doing viewings and identifications was going to be very emotional, very distressing. Actually, it's not. Most families are very dignified. There are rarely huge outpourings of emotion. I think it is not as bad as people quite often think it is going to be."

So do you want to see the person you love when they are dead? Maybe it's worth thinking about before the dreaded moment arrives. We won't get a second chance to get it right.

The professionals quoted in this article were interviewed as part of the podcast series, 'Dead Honest'.

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