

Bereavement Services for NHS patients and their relatives who are members of the Bahá'í Faith

Preparation for death

Bahá'ís and their families are just as prone to a variety of feelings when faced with dying or the sense of bereavement that death brings, as anyone else. Feelings of sadness, grief, denial, anger, frustration, fear may all be expected. Other feelings, perhaps less expected, may be experienced; for example, happiness, acceptance, peacefulness and impatience. All of these are natural and acceptable.

An important part of the rôle of the spiritual care giver or bereavement counsellor at this stage will be to lovingly remind and reassure the Bahá'í patient of his or her faith's teachings about the joy that he or she will experience in the next life and to help the patient, through prayer and love, to accept the transition. Bahá'ís are confident in an after life, recognising death as a transition to a further stage of life akin to the transition made when a baby is born. This world is a 'womb-world' for the life after death, and death is also birth into that next life. The spiritual care giver may also offer similar comfort to the bereaved family.

During the time leading up to death, the patient may well wish to pray. Relatives and friends may also wish to pray with the patient at his or her bedside or in quiet surroundings close to the patient in the time leading up to, including and after death. The British Bahá'í community is culturally and ethnically diverse, and the reaction of patients, their relatives and friends to death and bereavement will to a degree reflect these differences. For instance, when wishing to pray, while some may quietly recite prayers, others may wish to chant. In all cases, Bahá'ís will be aware of the need for dignity, moderation and as far as possible avoiding embarrassment to others.

A Bahá'í who is near death does not require any special intervention from a spiritual care giver or chaplain, but clearly he or she will want to have their loved ones around them at that time. The Bahá'í Faith has no priests or ministers and little in the way of public ritual. There are no sacraments or liturgy associated with death, nor is there any

concept of ritual purity or defilement. In other words, there are no sets of required, permitted or forbidden acts in relation to the dead body which would be seen as having consequences for the soul of the dead person. If there is time to prepare for death, it is very much up to the individual and those close to him or her to choose how to approach this. Bahá'ís understand that privacy may well be difficult to achieve in hospital. They have no objection to using spaces that are also used by people of other faiths.

At and after death

Bahá'ís believe the human soul comes into being at and develops from the time of conception. After death, the spirit ceases to have a connection with the body. However, as the body has been 'the temple of the spirit', it should continue to be treated at all times with dignity and respect. The body of the deceased should be buried not more than an hour's journey from the place of death. It should not be cremated. This applies equally to stillbirths and neonates.

In the case of a baby death, there is no objection if the parents ask, or are asked if they wish for a foot or hand print or a lock of hair of the child - there is nothing in the Bahá'í teachings about such matters. An unviable foetus, no matter how young, is still regarded as a person. Therefore it should not be retained as a specimen, regarded as clinical waste nor destroyed in an incinerator, but should be buried if possible. As there is nothing in Bahá'í scripture specifically referring to the manner of burial of embryos, how this is arranged is left to the discretion of the parents.

The preparation of the body for burial is a careful washing, after which it may be wrapped in cloth (silk, linen or cotton). Some Bahá'ís will have bought material in preparation for this, but there is no requirement for them to have done so. If this is not feasible, it is not considered damaging to the spiritual well-being of the dead if it is not done.

It is up to Bahá'í relatives, where they are at hand, how the body is to be prepared for the funeral. Some may wish to wash and wrap the body themselves, others may wish to use a funeral director. If no family member or funeral director is present on removal of the body to the mortuary, there is no objection to a staff member (male or female) - regardless of the gender of the dead person - washing and wrapping the body in a clean

sheet or shroud. There is no religious requirement for the body to be packed, though this may be done for aesthetic reasons.

When circumstances do not permit interment of the body to occur soon after passing, or should it be a requirement of civil law, the body may be embalmed, provided that the process used has the effect only of retarding the natural decomposition for a short period. The body should not be subjected to an embalming process which has the effect of preserving it without decomposition for a lengthy period. There is no requirement to hold a funeral within a set time of death, although this should not be unnecessarily delayed.

There is nothing in Bahá'í teachings with regard to turning the body over for scientific research, and therefore individual Bahá'ís may do so if they wish. Donation of organs after death for transplanting to others in need is regarded as praiseworthy, but in either case agreement for this to happen may not be taken for granted by clinical staff: it is left to the conscience of the individual whether or not to subscribe to a "living will". There is no objection to required post-mortem examination, but this should go ahead with due speed and with as much respect to the body as circumstances permit. In all cases what remains of the body should not be discarded but buried and treated respectfully.

Euthanasia is not permitted, although it is recognised that steps to ease suffering may, as a side effect, shorten life and this is accepted. There may come a time in the life of the patient when it becomes appropriate to withhold treatment, other than the palliation of suffering, especially if the patient's life is being prolonged because his or her family fear the loss and separation that death brings or because health care workers find it difficult to accept what they may see as 'defeat'.

A further document *Members of the Bahá'í Faith as Hospital Patients* has additional general information for nurses, doctors and health care workers.

These notes are necessarily brief - for further information or answers to specific queries, please contact the local Bahá'í community or the

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