

Disposition of Your Earthen Vessel: Choosing What's Right for You (Part 2)

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In Washington state, you have the right to direct how your body (i.e., your earthen vessel) is handled after death. Five methods of body disposition are currently legal in Washington: burial, cremation, terramation, aquamation, and full body donation. (See October 16 "Death Matters" for descriptions. Full body donation will be covered in a future "Death Matters" column.)

Choosing a means of body disposition can be difficult. The following factors are likely to influence your decision.

Your religion or culture. Many death rituals, rites, and ceremonies stem from religious or cultural beliefs about death and the afterlife.

Although practices vary by denomination, burial and cremation are the most common methods of body disposition among Christians. The Catholic church did not approve of cremation until 1963 and still prohibits scattering of the ashes; it has actively campaigned against laws legalizing terramation and aquamation.

In Judaism, burial is the preferred method of body disposition. Some non-orthodox Jewish communities permit cremation.

Hinduism and Buddhism consider cremation an essential part of one's spiritual journey. Islam does not allow embalming or cremation; the body is always buried.

Where you live or are likely to die. States have different laws governing the disposition of human remains. All states allow burial, cremation, and full body donation. Twelve states allow terramation and 28 states allow aquamation.

The place of death also impacts available services. If a certain process is not available locally, transportation of the body will increase the price of the service and negative impact on the environment. It can also complicate funeral arrangements and the conduct of memorial services.

Your finances. Burial is felt to be the most expensive body disposition option followed by terramation and aquamation. Cremation is usually considered the cheapest. The cost of each of these methods, however, can vary widely.

When examining costs, especially for services sold as a package, know exactly which services and materials are included in the quoted price and which are considered "add-ons" incurring an additional charge. Transportation of the body, materials from which the casket or urn are made, and a public viewing of the body are just a few of the factors that can affect the price.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) created the "Funeral Rule" in 1982 (implemented in 1984) which protects customers from misleading information and hidden costs. Among the "Funeral Rule" provisions, a provider of body disposition services must share pricing information by phone and offer an itemized statement for all services and goods that it provides (sometimes called a general price list). Under the rule, customers have the right to select only the services that they want and can't be forced into purchasing something that they do not want such as embalming.

The funeral business, like all businesses, has its own vocabulary that might not be familiar to you. Do not be afraid to ask for details or explanations; staff should be happy to talk everything through with you. For

a glossary of funeral terms see <https://www.cemetery.com/learning-center/resources-directories/funeral-terms-glossary>.

Environmental concerns. Disposition of a body can impact the environment in a variety of ways (e.g., emission of greenhouse gases and toxins, use of energy, and use of precious resources). As noted by Elizabeth Keijzer, an international sustainability consultant, “Humans [can] have a large influence on the environment, even when they are not living anymore.”

Terramation and aquamation are generally considered the most environmentally friendly forms of body disposition; both are carbon neutral, produce no toxic emissions, and use less energy than other means of body disposition. If these services are not available locally, however, and a body must be transported long distances, it might decrease the environmental advantages.

Due to rising environmental concerns, green (or natural) burials are gaining interest. In a green burial the body is not embalmed; it is placed in a biodegradable container, often a fibrous shroud, and placed directly in the ground without a grave liner. A list of cemeteries allowing green burials in Washington is available at <https://www.nhfuneral.org/green-burial-cemeteries-in-the-us-and-canada.html>.

So what means of body disposition is right for you? Failing to plan for your body after you die can leave the decision to others who are grief stricken by your death and unsure how to honor your wishes.

If you feel strongly about the disposition of your body, make your desires known. Record your wishes in a “letter of intent” or standardized “disposition of body” form that allows you to specify the means you desire and an authorized agent to carry out your instructions. Sign and date the form in the presence of a witness and share the document with your authorized agent and family members.

You can also work directly with a funeral home or service provider during end-of-life planning. Making and paying for pre-arrangements for body disposition is legally considered designation of authority in Washington state.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.