

How do undertakers care for the dead?

WARNING: What follows contains graphic descriptions and may make for uncomfortable or distressing reading. Don't read on if you are easily upset.

Once an undertaker has taken a dead person back to their mortuary, there are three things to be done:

1. Slow the process of decomposition by keeping the person who has died refrigerated
2. Wash and dress the body
3. Get the person who has died ready to be visited

Some undertakers recommend embalming, others don't. If you want to find out what embalming entails, read the factsheet [What is embalming?](#) **WARNING:** It is much more graphic than this factsheet.

An undertaker should ask for your permission to embalm but will not routinely ask your permission to do two things which you may feel you ought to know about so you must get your decision in first. These things involve closing the eyes and the mouth.

Why don't they ask first?

They don't ask for the kindest and most considerate of reasons: they think it best you don't know because you may find it upsetting.

If you wish to come and visit the person who has died in the 'chapel of rest', your undertaker wants you to have a good experience and one which reflects well on their duty of care. They want you to see the person who has died, who may have had a difficult and distressing death, looking serene and peaceful. They want your last, enduring memory to be a good one.

They set the features. They close the mouth and shut the eyes. People have been setting the features of their dead since the beginning of time.

Setting the features

On TV shows and in movies you are accustomed to seeing horrifically mutilated corpses, but the directors seem to think that you will not be able to bear to see their mouths gaping. In real life that's what mouths do. They're always shut in *Silent Witness*. That's how you know they're not dead.

What's more, most people's eyes stay open in death.

How do you close them?

Most undertakers shut the eyes by using eye caps. An eye cap is a plastic hemisphere dimpled on the outside. The eyelid is pulled up, the eye dried, the cap put on top of the eyeball and the eyelid pulled over it. This has the virtue also of plumping up the eyeballs, which sink in death.

The next paragraph is harder to read.

A Good Funeral Guide factsheet

Undertakers close the mouth by means of what they call a jaw suture: a long stitch made inside the mouth with a curved, threaded needle through the bottom lip beneath the teeth, up under the top lip, through the septum and back down into the mouth. A simple knot then pulls the jaw shut, the trick being not to tie it too tight – it creates a parrot expression. Lips ever so slightly parted is reckoned the best look.

If you find either of these procedures objectionable it is possible to keep eyes closed by either pulling the top lid over the lashes of the lower lid, or coating the edges with Vaseline. It is possible to keep the jaw shut by supporting it underneath the chin.

Alternatively, the jaw can simply be left open.

Be sure to tell your undertaker what he or she may or must not do. You have a duty of care, too.