



health

Department:  
Health  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



**INTERNAL MEMO**

Date:	25 January 2021		
To:	<b>The Honorable Dr ZL Mkhize, Minister of Health</b>	From:	<b>Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19</b>

**WRAPPING OF CORPSES IN PLASTIC COVERING PRIOR TO BURIAL**

**Problem Statement**

- The MACs on Social Behaviour and Traditional practices have raised concerns regarding the wrapping of coffins and corpses in multiple layers of plastic at place of death and burials. This contravenes certain cultural beliefs and rituals. Consequently, some graves have been dug up, the bodies illegally exhumed and the plastic coverings removed and the coffin reburied without approval.
- The task of this Technical Working Group (TWG) is to provide an evidence based advisory relating to safe infection prevention and control (IPC) practices on burials without increasing risk but being sensitive to these cultural beliefs.

**Evidence Review**

- The current World Health Organisation (WHO) guidance (Sept, 2020) on burials<sup>1</sup> reiterates the existing guidance and clarifies the previous recommendations (24<sup>th</sup> March, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. The National IPC Guidelines (South Africa),<sup>3</sup> based on WHO recommendations, outlines the evidence and steps required for handling of COVID-19 bodies and safe burial. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, has clarified the difference between death from Ebola and COVID-19<sup>4</sup> and the burial requirement for each.
- To date, there is no reported case of SARS CoV 2 transmission from a dead body to a human. There is very little risk of infection being transmitted from a dead body to those carefully handling the corpse. The possibility of the virus escaping during pressure applied to the chest soon after death might expel live virus but this has not been proven.
- When dealing with a dead body, all handlers must ensure that IPC precautions are in place such as wearing appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) which protects the body,

<sup>1</sup>WHO, Infection prevention and control for safe management of a dead body in the context of COVID-19, interim guidance, 4 Sept, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> [https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331538/WHO-COVID-19-IPC\\_DBMgmt-2020.1-eng.pdf](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/331538/WHO-COVID-19-IPC_DBMgmt-2020.1-eng.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> National Department of Health, South Africa. National IPC guidelines for COVID-19, May 2020

<sup>4</sup> CDC, Atlanta. How are COVID-19 burials different from Ebola Burials? <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/global-covid-19/COVID19-vs-Ebola-burial-guide.html>

<sup>5</sup> DIRECTIONS ISSUED IN TERMS OF REGULATION 4(1)(a) OF THE REGULATIONS MADE UNDER SECTION 27(2) OF THE DISASTER MANAGEMENT ACT, 2002 (ACT No. 57 OF 2002): MEASURES TO ADDRESS, PREVENT AND COMBAT THE SPREAD OF COVID -19 no 796 of 17 July 2020

respiratory tract and mucous membranes from accidental splash contamination. Hand hygiene, good ventilation and a clean environment is essential. The wrapping of bodies and coffins in plastic coverings prior to burial is unnecessary. Transmission at funerals occurs amongst the living due to overcrowding, lack of social distancing and wearing of masks, carrying out hand hygiene and good ventilation. WHO recommends the use of body bags to transfer the corpse from the hospital bed to the mortuary or funeral parlour for preparation. This is to avoid exposure to body fluids. If there are no signs of fluid leak, a shroud is acceptable. All those handling the body, whether HCW or family, must abide by the rules of carefully handling the body, hand hygiene, wearing appropriate PPE, and cleaning/ disinfection after the process is completed.

- No exhumation or reburial can be conducted without authorisation.
  - Exhumation should be conducted in terms of Regulation 27 of the Regulations relating to the management of Human Remains, 2013 (No. R363 of 22 May 2013)
  - All reburials should be conducted in terms of Regulation 28 of the Regulations relating to the management of Human Remains, 2013 (No. R363 of 22 May 2013)

### **Recommendations**

The existing guidelines or regulations regarding the handling of corpses should be updated to capture the following guidance:

- Wrapping of the coffin with plastic or any other material is not required for infection control.
- Wrapping of the corpse with plastic is not required for infection control, as there is no evidence of transmission of COVID-19 from a corpse.
- Alternatives, such as a body bag, blanket or shroud may be used to wrap a corpse for burial.
- The face may be exposed during the funeral proceedings, provided that it is not possible to touch or hug the face. To prevent touching the corpse, a Perspex or similar cover over the exposed face should be used.
- All those handling the corpse should use appropriate PPE as they may have to handle infectious materials and surfaces
- No exhumation or reburial should be conducted without legal authorisation.

### **IPC / Health Directions steps for conducting a burial in the case of a confirmed COVID-19 death**

#### **Place of death- (hospital or home)**

- Wear appropriate PPE
- move corpse to mortuary or funeral parlour **in a body bag**

#### **Mortuary/ funeral parlour**

- Wear appropriate PPE (HCW)
- Prepare corpse for viewing or burial
- Allow viewing by the family onsite- strictly controlled
- Wrap in shroud/ blanket (traditional beliefs) or a body bag (if preferred by family)

### **Body for viewing (funeral)**

- laid in open casket, coffin or similar based on religious beliefs (no plastic wrapping necessary)
- A person issued with authorization/permission to bury the deceased and the program director to ensure compliance with COVID-19 IPC recommendations
- Law enforcement agents to monitor compliance at the viewing
- Single file viewing of body only with the following in place:
  - wear face mask
  - distance of 1.5 m
  - good ventilation
  - may use a clear sheet over face (if indicated)
- NO touching, kissing or contact with the body
- Hand hygiene to be practiced.

### **Transport to burial site**

- Closed casket/coffin- no plastic wrapping
- Pall bearers: Wear PPE – gloves, masks.
- Discard PPE after use
- Hand hygiene,
- Clean transportation vehicle

Thank you for consideration of this request.

Kind regards,



**PROFESSOR SALIM S. ABDOOL KARIM**

**PROF MARIAN JACOBS**

**CO-CHAIRPERSONS: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19**

**DATE: 25 January 2021**

**CC:**

- » **Dr S Buthelezi (Director-General: Health)**
- » **Dr T Pillay (Deputy Director-General)**
- » **Incident Management Team**