



Meaningful Ageing
AUSTRALIA

Ritual Washing of the Body

A Guide for Care Staff



This guide was developed by Annie Whitlocke, a spiritual care practitioner, funeral celebrant, and death doula. She has extensively studied death rituals, and has drawn together her experience here to guide you in supporting family members to tend to their loved one's body.

Introduction

Talking about our end of life, at whatever age that will be, is an act of kindness towards ourselves and others. The washing of the body of our beloved deceased is an ancient and respectful act. It is not connected with a specific faith or spiritual tradition, as it speaks of an ancient time honouring process that has been forgotten or dismissed over the ages. In Islam and Judaism, the washing of the body is a common practice. For thousands of years it was an act of kindness not only towards our beloved dead but an opportunity towards the healing of the living. I have found this to be true and I am humbled by it regularly.

I wrote this washing of the body practice to let people know that they can do as little or as much as they are comfortable with. Dignity and privacy is practiced at all times. After my years of reading and study of this action, I use a combination of practices that I have learnt. I thank all my teachers.

Preparing for the Ritual

When family and friends want to be a part of the washing of the body ritual, it's important to make sure beforehand that certain instruments like catheters, syringes, tapes, nasal feeding tubes etc. are removed. Change the diaper/pads. If I am in the room I will be talking to the deceased, letting them know what we are doing and why. For example, "Dear Bill, we are now preparing you for the washing of your body, and just removing some things to make it easier for your loved ones"

I always check beforehand that there is nothing too confrontational that may make people feel uncomfortable. Such as hair from the nose, pus or dried blood in the nose, ears or round the eyes. Clean around the mouth and put false teeth back into the mouth. If the body is not in a position that will be easy to wash, I massage the joints until I can manipulate them, so the arms are by the side and the hands are not clenched. Legs are straight and facial features are softened. Always check to see what parts of the body are affected by lividity (blood settling resulting in purple bruise like marks). As this can be distressing for family, try to prepare them before hand by explaining it is a normal bodily process after death.

If possible, ask the family/friends to bring some symbol or small possession of the deceased to place on an 'altar' (a special table set apart in their room). Things like photos, pictures, flowers, even things like a glass of red wine (or bottle), or chocolates might be appropriate in this gathering of precious items. Creating an 'altar' before the person dies aides people to remind the dying person of things they have derived pleasure from, and to have a community spiritual feel in the room. This can be wonderful before the person dies and can assist them to reflect on their life and things that meant something to them. It also helps family members to remember what the person enjoyed and can provide relief from their own personal grief and sadness.

You will need access to a range of personal care items. These might include: shaver, shaving cream, scissors, face washers, towels, a few different essential oils, comb, organic very light oil based cream, nail clippers, fine plastic gloves, tissues and hand towels.

Once the above preparation has been done, request several face washers and a few towels. One or two bowls for the warm water. As hospital rooms may be cramped it is a good idea to have a bowl on each side of the deceased person. This is to avoid needing to reach over the body to rinse out the face washer.

Before the family members arrive, I ensure that the deceased person is modestly covered, males with towels over the groin and females over the breasts and groin. This will depend on who will be doing the washing and what the deceased person's relationship is. If the deceased is a child, then the parents may want to wash the entire body. If a parent has died then usually modesty is significant. If the body is badly damaged then maybe, then just the face or hands or feet.

The Ritual

I place a sheet over the body and ask the participants to come in. I ask them to stand near their beloved and place their hands on the sheets. I then explain what we will be doing and why. To prepare the family members, I always let people know that they can do as much or as little as they feel they can do. There is no right or wrong. This will be dependent on the faith or spiritual background of those present and the deceased.

I speak the name of the deceased out loud and tell them who is present and what we will be doing and why. I make sure, if possible, to have a window open so that sunlight can come into the room. Usually if there are a few people then we will start on either side and begin from the head. Music can be played. But I find that silence is powerful and helps to allow people to be more present. If some people do not want to participate in the washing then ask them to read aloud a verse that is meaningful. This helps them to feel they are part of this ritual and have participated.

I ask one person to choose what essential oil to use. I place a few drops in both bowls of warm water. We slightly wet the face washers and slowly begin washing the body. I participate and keep the motions slow and gentle, people follow me. I am alert at all time to how some people may be reacting and let them know they can take a rest.

Usually some will talk of their memories, some may cry and some may laugh at their memories. After we have washed and dried the body, I explain we will now anoint the body with cream. By this stage, the body is looking better and the cream helps to add some tones to their face.

Throughout the process, I am speaking to the deceased person. This supports the other people present to feel they can also speak to the deceased. After the washing, I will ask if anyone would like to say something or sing. If not then I always say that silence is also perfect.

To complete the ritual, I place a blanket on top of the deceased. I then inform people that I will leave and I thank them for being part of this ancient ceremony of caring for our dead.

A Spoken Blessing for the Ritual

Dear....., we stand before you to honour your life and now to honour your dying.

Daughter/son of....., husband/wife of, mother/father of.....,
granddaughter/grandson of, sister/brother of

We stand here before your ancestors and our intention is of humility, to cleanse your once precious body as you were cleansed on your first arrival.

We respect your modesty and at all times dedicate our acts of service to your peace of mind.

We are washing your body, [name], with fragrant oils and warm pure water. With clean and soft materials that are smooth and caring for your skin.

Our hands pass gently over your body to cleanse and aid in purifying your final journey.

Gone are the elements that kept you to this body, the earth element of your physical body, the fire element of the warmth of life within your blood and organs, the water element of the fluids of life within your body and the wind element which gave you life with each breath.

Gone are the senses that attached you to the world around you, now no more of the sense of sight, now no more of the sense of sound, now no more of the sense of smell, now no more of the sense of taste and now no more of the sense of touch.

You are now free of these senses that held you to your body.

[Name], we ask your forgiveness if we have made any mistakes. Please know our intention is of great respect and for the sake of your honour.

Deep Peace to You [name]. Deep peace of the running wave to you.

Deep peace of the flowing air to you.... Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you.... Deep peace of the infinite peace to you.

May your eyes be blessed. We honour and remember the way your eyes looked upon us with love.

May your nose be blessed. We honour and remember the vigour with which you breathed in life and encouraged us to do the same.

May your mouth be blessed. We remember and honour your words and wisdom you spoke to us.

May your heart be blessed. We remember and honour your heartfelt actions, and the care you expressed so fully.

May your hands be blessed. We remember and honour the work of your hands, and their loving touch.

May your feet be blessed. We remember and honour the path you walked.

About Annie

Annie Whitlocke is a Buddhist Spiritual Carer at Monash Medical Centre and teaches relaxation therapy at Peter Mac Moorabbin to inpatients, staff, family, chemo patients and dialysis patients. She is a death doula who has trained with Zenith Virago as a Deathwalker and Denise Love as a Death Doula in the art of caring for the deceased and creating ritual and ceremony for the living.

Annie has had her own personal life experience with the death of her baby granddaughter and her baby nephew. Annie's husband died in a car accident when she was 30 years old, a fiancée took his life and she has cared for her now deceased mother who had Alzheimer's. Annie dearly would like people to be as peaceful as possible at end of life.

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