COVID-19: Deaths, funerals and tangihanga: Information for funeral directors

29 May 2020

Bereaved families and whānau from all cultures and backgrounds will find this time challenging. This makes it even more important to show each other kindness, care, manaakitanga and aroha.

As we have seen in New Zealand and overseas, gatherings present a very high risk for transmission of COVID-19. We must protect people’s health and ensure our health system can look after people who become sick.

These guidelines apply to all deceased persons, regardless of when and where they died, or the cause of death.

It includes public gatherings at tangihanga, burials, cremations, kawe/hari mate, memorial services, processions and receptions, both indoors and outdoors.

The guidance for gatherings will be reviewed in the future. If any changes are made for funerals and tangihanga information will be available on the Ministry of Health website.

What happens at Alert Level 2?

Gatherings of up to 100 people (indoors or outdoors) for funerals and tangihanga, are permitted at Alert Level 2.

Infection prevention and control measures

The following infection prevention and control measures must be implemented:

- The gathering must not have more than 100 people present, excluding workers (for example, kaikōrero, kaikaranga, members of the clergy, and the funeral director), at any one time in a separate ‘defined space’.
  - A defined space is an indoor space with walls or partitions (whether permanent or temporary) that substantially divide that space from other spaces, or an outdoor space with walls or partitions or where any member of a group of 100 people or less are more than 2 metres away from any other person in another group.
- The organiser must collect detailed records for the purposes of contact tracing from attendees.
- The organiser must retain those records for 2 months after the date of the gathering and once they are 2 months old they should be destroyed.
- Any venue (including funeral homes, churches, marae, community halls, mosques and private homes) where the gathering takes place must have a Health and Safety plan covering personal hygiene and infection prevention and control measures. This plan should also be updated to incorporate the guidelines for each alert level.
- The Health and Safety plan must be displayed so it is easily viewed by everyone who visit the premises and communicated to all attendees so they are aware of any restrictions and/or requirements.

People who are sick with cold or flu-like symptoms or are waiting for COVID-19 test results should not attend funerals or tangihanga, a viewing, religious/cultural ritual, service or burial.
Appropriate handwashing facilities should be available and hand sanitiser should be provided. People should use these every time when entering any premises.

Frequently touched surfaces and objects should be sanitised after each viewing, religious/cultural ritual, service or event has taken place. For example, after each visiting group of up to 100 mourners or manuhiri have left the marae, every area that was frequently touched by people should be thoroughly sanitised and cleaned with disinfectant, this may include the paepae and ablution and wharekai facilities. This should be completed before the next visiting group of up to 100 mourners or manuhiri arrive on the premises/venue or ‘defined space’.

Food and drink are now permitted at all gatherings. It is recommended all gatherings (indoor or outdoor) should be kept short (under 2 hours).

If family or whānau wish to hold a viewing, religious/cultural ritual or service for the deceased at another venue such as a marae, church, community hall, mosque or the like, responsibility for maintaining health guidelines lies with the owners or operators of those facilities.

Funeral directors are encouraged to return to normal practice where possible, as long as the public health guidelines are followed.

Making funeral arrangements between funeral directors and family/whānau

When making funeral arrangements with family and whānau, funeral directors should:
  - Continue to make arrangements where possible via telephone, video conferencing or other forms of electronic communication
  - Where arrangements need to be made face-to-face, ideally these should take place in the funeral home
  - Where face-to-face meetings take place, personal hygiene measures should be followed.

Funeral directors are encouraged to provide opportunities for family, whānau and friends to go to the funeral home to view the body or undertake religious/cultural rituals.

Contact tracing register

Contact tracing is an important element of our response to COVID-19. With this in mind, funeral directors or the organiser of the ceremony must keep a contact tracing register with the details of all persons attending any part of the funeral process. This register must include:

  - exact day and time the event took place
  - full names of all attending the event
  - email addresses or mobile phone numbers

Funeral directors or venue owners should keep contact tracing records secure for two months and once they are two months old they should be destroyed. The information in the register must only be used for the purpose of contact tracing and only shared with the Ministry of Health or district health boards, should this be required.

Groupings of peoples

Each group of up to 100 people, will be considered as ‘one cohort’ with the expectation that they will not interact with any other cohort in or around the premises/venue or ‘defined space’.
Registered funeral directors should handle deceased persons

A registered funeral director should be engaged to carry out the functions of care and preparation of the deceased and may assist with transportation, burial or cremation and service arrangements.

Viewing of the deceased

When holding viewings, religious/cultural rituals or services:

- The number of people who will be able to attend a viewing, service or other gathering cannot exceed 100 visiting mourners or manuhiri at any one time in a separate ‘defined space’
- Similarly, the number of people who will be able to attend a viewing, service or other gathering will need to be negotiated with the nominated kaiwhakarite or family spokesperson depending on the size of the private dwelling, marae, church, community hall, mosque or the like (taking into consideration hygiene requirements) but cannot exceed 100 visiting mourners or manuhiri at any one time in a separate ‘defined space’

Religious and/or cultural rituals

Funeral directors may also allow religious rituals for the care of the body to occur. However, these must be carried out in the presence of an embalmer who will give direction to anyone present on the correct requirements.

For example, Muslims have two fundamental requirements for funeral and burial, ghusl (ritual washing) and janaza (prayer over the body), that must be carried out by Muslims and in accordance with their rules for handling of the body. In this example, funeral directors may wish to work with their Muslim communities to identify Muslim males and females who can prepare the body of the deceased for correct funeral and burial, with the support of the embalming staff.

Activities such as kissing, washing or touching the body should be discouraged before, during and after any ritual.

Travelling to attend a funeral or tangihanga

Under Alert Level 2, travel is permitted between regions but people are encouraged to do it safely. You do not have to apply for an exemption to travel.

Transporting deceased persons inter-regionally

Deceased persons are allowed to be transported inter-regionally either through a funeral director or privately.

The deceased may be transported from the funeral home for viewing purposes at a private residence, church, mosques, halls, marae or other venues.

Family/whānau may escort the deceased.
Funerals/tangihanga, burial/nehunga, cremations and receptions with food and refreshments following

Funeral directors, families or communities can carry out funerals and tangihanga during this time as long as the infection prevention and control measures are followed. These measures are outlined at the beginning of this factsheet.

Multiple groups of up to 100 are allowed to attend funerals and tangihanga in the lead up to the official burial, nehunga or cremation. However, the group that attends the service directly before the burial or nehunga must be the same group of up to 100 that travels from the service with the tūpāpaku to the cemetery or urupā.

This same group can be provided with food and refreshments following the service. It is recommended gatherings following the burial, nehunga and cremation are kept short (under 2 hour).

All frequently touched surfaces and objects (like where food is prepared and served, and kitchenware) should be thoroughly cleaned before and after each and every gathering. People may also choose to use disposable kitchenware to make the sanitisation process easier.

Cremations and exemptions from viewing a body

On 1 April 2020, the Minister of Health authorised medical referees to permit cremations to be carried out during COVID-19 Alert Level Four, without complying with regulation 7 of the Cremation Regulations 1973, when people have died in a rest home, residential care facility, or other long-term in-patient facility.

On 25 April 2020, the Minister of Health authorised medical referees to permit cremations to be carried out without complying with regulation 7 of the Cremation Regulations 1973, for the duration of the Epidemic Preparedness (COVID-19) Notice 2020.

Before a body can be cremated, the Cremation Regulations 1973 require the permission of a medical referee. Under regulation 7 of the Regulations, a medical referee cannot permit any cremation unless a cremation certificate is issued by a certifying practitioner which requires the medical or nurse practitioner to see and identify the body. This creates risks for both practitioners and facility operators to protect residents and themselves from potential infection with COVID-19.

The Minister of Health has authorised medical referees under regulation 12(b) of the Cremation Regulations 1973 to permit cremations to be carried out without complying with regulation 7 for cremations where completion of a cremation certificate by a certifying practitioner would increase the risk of transmission of COVID-19. This authorisation applies in rest homes, residential care facilities, and other long-term in-patient facilities where the medical history and current conditions of the deceased are known by the medical or nurse practitioner, but not to hospitals or hospices.

Certifying practitioners should make reasonable efforts to view the deceased’s body outside of the residential facility (for example at a funeral home). Where this is not possible, the funeral director must confirm whether there is a biomechanical aid present in the body (for example by completing the certificate developed by the New Zealand Embalmers' Association Incorporated).

Under this authorisation a medical referee must receive advice from a trusted source, who has a reasonable level of assurance of the cause of death to verify the identity of the deceased and that the deceased died of natural causes, in lieu of a certifying practitioner providing a cremation certificate. Certifying practitioners must provide the details of the trusted source who confirmed the identity of the deceased in writing to the medical referee. Medical referees will have discretion in determining who constitutes a trusted source but are not required to validate the credentials of a trusted source. Medical referees must check that the identity, contact details, and position of the trusted source have been recorded. Funeral directors may collect details of the trusted source, who identifies the deceased to the funeral director, using the Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand standard form.
Guidance for certifying deaths due to COVID-19

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) has developed guidelines for health practitioners to use when certifying causes of death for people who died of, or with COVID-19. These guidelines are based on World Health Organization recommendations so are applicable to all countries. The guidelines can be found at Guidance for Certifying Deaths due to COVID-19.

For information about certifying documents online see Completing Death Documents. Viewing for the purpose of coronial identification is still permitted during Alert Level 2.