

Obesity crisis takes toll on pallbearers

» JULIE POWER

One of the oldest rites of respect for the dead, the shouldering of the coffin by pallbearers, is being phased out as too risky as obesity takes a toll on the funeral industry.

As Australians become heavier, the industry is having to change traditions, introduce automation to reduce the risk of injury and upsize everything from coffins to graves.

It is now routine for funeral directors to keep a stock of oversized coffins, but even those are not big enough for the increasing number of morbidly obese who require custom-built coffins, funeral directors say. Some crematoriums and mortuaries are turning away obese corpses because they do not have the equipment to safely handle the weights, and health and safety regulations discourage manual handling.

"The idea of shoulder-carrying is a major occupational health and safety issue and there are real dangers attached to that," said Warwick Hansen, who has worked in the industry for 47 years and is a former past president of the industry's NSW branch. "We try to discourage people from that."

The average coffin is now 182 centimetres long, 50.8 centimetres wide across the shoulders and 33.5 centimetres deep, compared with 175x46x30 about 20 years ago. Often

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burial plots have to be widened from a standard one-metre width.

Mr Hansen's company recently buried a Wollongong man who was 320 kilograms. "We had to remove part of the house to get him out," he said. Because of the dead man's size, the service was conducted at the graveside to eliminate excess handling. "Everything was done reverently and respectfully," said Mr Hansen, regional manager with Hansen and Cole Funerals. The man was too large to fit into a standard grave so he was buried in a wider one at the end of a row. "It took 10 men using straps, like lowering tapes, to lower the coffin down into the grave."

A report by the National Preventative Health Taskforce on obesity forecast as many as 1.7 million people

Weighty matters Down Under

148,000 Australians die each year, including about **47,000** in NSW. **Three** out every **five** Australian adults are overweight or obese. That's more than **12 million** people. **1.7 million** deaths are forecast from problems associated with being overweight or obese between now and 2050.

Sources: ABS, Australian Institute of Health, National Preventative Health Taskforce 2009

will die from being overweight or obese by 2050 if trends continue. That's 10.3 million lost years of life for Australians aged 20 to 74, with each fat person dying an average of 12 years earlier than he or she would otherwise have, the report said.

Daryn McKay, regional operations manager with Invocare in Queensland, which owns the Albany Creek memorial park, said the company installed an oversized cremator because it didn't want to discriminate against the obese by refusing to handle their funerals. It also charges the same, although some in the industry are considering higher fees.

Even so, staff were "rightly nervous" about the recent cremation of an obese young man when it took eight men to lift the 320-kilogram

coffin including corpse, said Marcus Cowie, the general manager of Austeng, an engineering company that manufactures oversized cremators, prefabricated burial sites and moving trolleys to reduce manual handling of the deceased. Staff did a trial run supervised by Mr Cowie to ensure nothing went wrong. They filled a test coffin with bags of concrete and inserted it into a cold furnace, trying to avoid the high risk of fire that could happen if the coffin were to catch fire in a 900-degree furnace before the door was closed. Disposing of the corpse took four hours, twice as long as the average.

In Europe, several fires have been started at crematoriums disposing of the remains of obese people.

"If you put in a huge fuel load, such

as a really fat person, the older ones used to take off," Mr Cowie said.

Last month funeral director Joanne Cummings, of Pilbara Funeral Services, had to store an obese man in her car overnight with the airconditioning running full blast after a Port Hedland morgue refused to take the body. Ms Cummings then drove the body 200 kilometres back to her home outside of Karratha in Western Australia. After keeping the man cool in her car, she rented a refrigerated shipping unit to store him before the funeral.

"I had to deal with his parents, and they were horrified," Ms Cummings said. "They wanted to have a viewing and we couldn't do it."

The threat of injury associated with handling the dead is forcing the industry to consider automating every aspect, said Peter O'Meara, chief executive of the Catholic Cemeteries and Crematoria Trust. As part of an industry wide no-lift initiative, the trust was investigating the potential for fully automated coffin trolleys that could navigate the narrow and often bumpy paths in old cemeteries such as Rookwood. It already has an automated process where the catafalque (the table holding the coffin) drops below the floor to a tunnel where a conveyer delivers the coffin to the crematorium without manual handling.