

Sands Position Statement Cremation and Ashes

In late 2012, a group of parents in Scotland discovered that Mortonhall Crematorium in Edinburgh was burying ashes from infant cremations, without the knowledge or consent of the parents. The parents had been told that there would be no ashes following the cremation of their stillborn and very young babies. This practice had been going on for over 30 years.

Two enquiries were set up in 2013: Edinburgh Council set up the Mortonhall Enquiry, and the Scottish Government set up the Infant Cremation Commission. UK Sands sent submissions to both investigations. Both reports were published in 2014.

The reports found that while the managers and staff of some crematoria in Scotland went to great lengths to meet the needs of bereaved parents and to offer them the ashes from the cremation whenever possible, others, including Mortonhall, did not. The latter justified this by claiming that there are no human remains in any ashes that are left after the cremation of a very young baby.

From evidence presented to the Mortonhall enquiry we now know that there is evidence of human remains in ashes after cremation of a baby born as early as 17 weeks, provided that the cremation process is adapted for babies. Some crematoria manage the cremation process so that whenever possible some ashes, however few, remain following the cremation of these babies.

Both the Scottish reports entirely reject any distinction between ashes and human remains. The report of the Infant Cremation Commission states: 'Cremation authorities should review their practices immediately to ensure that, in dealing with the "ashes" following cremation, they proceed on the basis that the "ashes" are "all that is left at the end of the cremation process".'

The reports recommended that all crematoria in Scotland review and, where necessary, change their practices to provide the best possible service for bereaved parents.

Implications for the whole of the UK

It soon became clear that practices at some crematoria in the rest of the UK are equally unsatisfactory.

In July 2014, Sands wrote to the Heads of Midwifery and Chief Executives of all NHS Trust and Health Boards in England and Wales, asking them to review their contracts with crematoria and funeral directors and to check that:

- ashes are routinely offered to parents after a single baby is cremated.
- separate trays are used whenever possible during a shared cremation so that individual ashes can be offered to the parents.
- after a shared cremation without the use of trays, parents are always told where the ashes have been buried or scattered.

If the crematorium that the Trust or Health Board currently uses will not follow best practice, Sands asked them to find another crematorium that meets the needs of bereaved parents and offers parents ashes whenever possible. It is unacceptable to deny grieving parents the choice of having ashes following the cremation of their baby.

Sands urged all Trusts and Health Boards in England and Wales to make sure that hospital staff always inform parents whose baby will be cremated whether they will be offered ashes. If there will not be individual ashes following a shared cremation, the parents must be told where the ashes will be scattered or buried and any options for a memorial plaque or stone. If there will be no ashes at all, parents must be told this so that they can make other arrangements if they want to. Some parents may decide to choose another crematorium, or may opt for burial instead, even if this means arranging and paying for the funeral themselves.

Sands also wrote to the authorities responsible for crematoria , and to the relevant professional organisations, to explain the importance to parents of having ashes wherever possible and to urge those crematoria that currently do not provide ashes to change their practice. Copies of the letters that were sent to Trusts and Health Boards in England and Wales, and also to Crematoria, are on the Sands website: <https://uk-sands.org/campaigns/our-campaigns/cremation-and-ashes>

©Sands 2014

Improving Bereavement Care Team