

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 of stillborn and very young babies had been told that there would be no ashes following the cremation. This practice had been going on for over 30 years.

Two enquiries were set up in 2013 in response to this discovery. Edinburgh Council set up the Mortonhall Enquiry and the Scottish Government set up the Infant Cremation Commission. UK Sands sent submissions to both investigations.

The reports of both enquiries were published in 2014. These reports found that 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. Other crematoria, including Mortonhall, justified not offering ashes to parents 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 the cremation of a baby born as early as 17 weeks when the cremation process is adapted for babies.

Both 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.

Best practice in 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.

- Parents are always told where ashes have been buried or scattered after a shared cremation without the use of trays.

Whenever possible, Sands asked Trusts or Health Boards to find another crematorium that meets the needs of bereaved parents and offers parents ashes when their current crematorium will not follow best practice.

Sands' position is that denying grieving parents the choice of having ashes following the cremation of their baby is unacceptable. Sands urged Trusts and Health Boards to ensure that hospital staff always inform parents whether they will be offered ashes if their baby is cremated. 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 informed so that they can make other arrangements if they wish. 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. This correspondence explained the importance to parents of having ashes wherever possible and urged crematoria that currently do not provide ashes to change their practice.

Copies of Sands' letters to Trusts, Health Boards and crematoria are available on the Sands website: <https://uk-sands.org/campaigns/our-campaigns/cremation-and-ashes>

When ashes have been stored or scattered without parents' knowledge

In instances where ashes have been stored or scattered by funeral directors without parents' knowledge, Sands suggests that funeral directors write to the parents involved to ask whether they would like to collect or have their baby's ashes sent to them or if they would like to know where the ashes have been scattered. In addition, funeral directors should ensure that a baby's ashes or information about where a baby's ashes have been scattered are retained until such time as parents wish to access them. Sands would also suggest that funeral directors acknowledge that receiving this letter may be distressing for some parents. Funeral directors should provide details of the support offered by Sands in the letter should parents wish to access these resources.

Sands acknowledges that parents may be very distressed after learning that ashes had been available following the cremation of their baby. However, Sands recommends that parents are informed about their baby's ashes as this transparency offers parents choice and accurate information about their baby's remains. Sands is available to support any parent who may have been affected.

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Improving Bereavement Care Team