

Dead End: Mortuary Education

So you want to be a funeral director, not just a home funeral guide? Most states require that you pass the “National Board Exam” (NBE) first. To see what you will have to know, let’s take a look at the study guide. It’s put out by the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards (ICFSEB). These are folks from around the country who sit on state funeral boards and are practicing funeral directors.¹

The purpose of the exam, they write, is to determine who meets the “MINIMUM QUALIFICATIONS to function as an entry level funeral director and/or embalmer.” A sampling from the Sociology section of the exam:

1. A funeral rite that in essence is devoid of religious connotation is known as:
 - A. adaptive
 - B. traditional
 - C. humanistic**
 - D. memorial service
10. In a nuclear family, when the spouse dies, the surviving spouse:
 - A. never marries
 - B. raises the children alone**
 - C. depends on relatives to raise the children
 - D. returns to his or her family to let them raise the children.
11. A joint family would most likely be found in which of the following settings?
 - A. metropolitan
 - B. urban
 - C. suburban
 - D. rural**
15. Which of the family types traditionally practices patriarchal governance?
 - A. joint**
 - B. nuclear
 - C. blended
 - D. egalitarian

¹ When one is bitten by the funeral bug and studies everything available about the funeral industry, mortuary education becomes a most curious topic. Some years ago, Carlson sent for her first copy of the study guide. She was stunned by what she got:

*Which of the following pigments is not necessary to match all skin colors—
red, green, brown, yellow?*

Not only were the questions shallow and out-of-date (“floppy disks” had definitely been replaced by new computer technology by that time), the exam was so rife with spelling and other errors that it was an embarrassment. “Mortal turpitude” gave the biggest chuckle. Carlson volunteered a free edit before the next printing, which was gratefully requested a few months later.

The first four questions in the history section are:¹

1. The first secular funeral director in the western world was:
 - A. Praecio
 - B. Libitina
 - C. Kher-heb
 - D. Litibinarius [misspelled]**
2. Cremation first gained widespread acceptance and practice in:
 - A. ancient Rome
 - B. Hebrew lands
 - C. ancient Greece**
 - D. Scandinavian countries
3. The Roman funeral was typically carried out by:
 - A. the family
 - B. the church
 - C. Military legions
 - D. public officials and paid secular functionaries**
4. To keep down the cost of funerals in the Middle Ages, people often formed:
 - A. Burial Clubs**
 - B. Church groups
 - C. Memorial Societies
 - D. Insurance Associations.

Now peek at the “Psychology and Counseling” section:

2. A person who expresses anxiety and discomfort while attending a visitation at a funeral home is most likely experiencing a/an:
 - A. inborn response
 - B. reaction displacement
 - C. conditioned response**
 - D. delayed response

¹ When Carlson listed these four questions in a FEO newsletter article, “What Are They Teaching About Religious Diversity” (with the conclusion “Not much”), she was sent the following letter by Peter Drumm, General Counsel:

I am the attorney for the International Conference of Funeral Service Examining Boards, Inc. (the “Conference”) which is the owner of the copyrights and publisher of the Study Guide for the National Board Exam for Funeral Service Practitioners in the United States. [He forgot to mention Canada.] The purpose of this letter is to put you on notice of copyright infringements . . .

This letter is an official notification that you are in violation of copyright of the Conference in your unauthorized use of these questions developed by the Conference for use in its Study Guide.

I ask that you immediately remove from your article the four questions taken from the study guide and make no more distribution . . . and you should block web access to the article until the questions are removed.

Carlson’s r response to Mr. Drumm cited “Fair Use” under copyright law that permits such use for the purpose of criticism, comment and teaching. Both are posted on the FEO website, bottom of the page: <http://www.funeraethics.org/newsletter>

3. Which of the following is a determinant of grief?
- A. feelings
 - B. concurrent stresses**
 - C. behaviors
 - D. hostile reactions
6. According to Bowlby, attachments come from a need for:
- A. sex
 - B. love
 - C. food and protection
 - D. safety and security**
11. Psychology is defined as the study of:
- A. emotion
 - B. human behavior**
 - C. social groups
 - D. the mind
19. Which if the following acts of mourning is to experience the pain of loss?
- A. First
 - B. Second**
 - C. Third
 - D. Fourth

Gosh, golly, gee. Why does one not feel reassured that if you pass these questions—plus another hundred-plus equally useless, vague, badly-worded, or irrelevant questions that you will meet the “MINIMUM” requirements to become a funeral director? What’s missing is more significant than the drivel they’ve published. Only two superficial questions in Funeral Law mention the Federal Trade Commission’s Funeral Rule, yet a violation of the Rule could result in a \$16,000 fine.¹ Knowledge of religious and cultural diversity? Not if your family is Native American or from the Asian, Indian, or African continents. No ethics questions. No questions on who other than next-of-kin might have the legal authority to arrange a funeral (38 states now have a designated agent law). No questions on prepaid funerals. No contemporary cremation questions at a time when the cremation rate in some states is 50% or more.

There appears to be some confusion as to how the exam was developed or is structured. On one page of the Study Guide is stated, “All the questions . . . are linked . . . to the curriculum outline of the American Board of Funeral Service Education” (ABFSE). That group is made up of mortuary school educators that nudged the Conference out of the business of accrediting schools in the middle of the last century. ABFSE seems willing to let the Conference continue the testing, however. These two groups, with a history of unfriendly competition, apparently can’t get their act together.

On a subsequent page of the Study Guide, ICFSEB has lurched out in a totally different

¹ Based on various violations of the Rule she had seen, Carlson put together a 50-question quiz on the Funeral Rule for the FEO newsletter. Few get all the answers right on the first try.

direction. “In order to determine what tasks the entry level funeral director and/or embalmer should be able to perform, a geographically diverse group of funeral directors and embalmers drew up an initial list of tasks which funeral directors and embalmers performed in the field.[1985]” The list was up-dated in 1991, 1998 and 2004, we are told. When Michael LuBrant, director of the four-year mortuary program at the University of Minnesota asked ICFSEB to see the data in the process of his Ph.D. work on criteria for mortuary education they declined to share their information. What legitimate educational organization would be afraid of academic scrutiny or operate in such secrecy?

That other group, the ABFSE, that’s who! When Carlson was working on a cremation article for the FEO newsletter, “Lighting a Fire Under Mortuary Education,” she asked to get a copy of the mortuary school curriculum. She was refused. Fortunately, in the process of surveying all the mortuary schools to see what they were teaching — or not — about cremation, one brave soul agreed to leak an extra copy. Out of over four hundred pages, only two cover cremation and cremation merchandise. Several schools gladly shared that they went way beyond what was required in the curriculum guide, and one provided an excellent outline of the course work covering cremation.¹ Other schools simply acknowledged that they “teach to the exam.”

What does go on in mortuary schools? When Carlson asked on a funeral directors’ listserve, “How relevant was your mortuary education?” she was not surprised to get answers like these “Not relevant at all” “Little to none. All they were good for was to pass the boards.” “The focus was to get us prepared for the board exams. Since the school was owned by a chemical company the underlying focus was to feature their chemicals in classroom settings.” “The word "cremation" rarely came up in classes.”

From a woman who later became a nurse, “Besides doing my own personal research into the development of the funeral industry in the United States, I attended courses in the Mortuary Science Department at San Antonio College in San Antonio, Texas. It was there that I got a behind-the-scenes look of the industry and what individuals wishing to become funeral directors were taught. It was during one of the first class meetings that the instructor stated, and I quote, ‘This is about making money off the dead, and if that is not what you are here for, you are in the wrong program.’ I was struck by his honesty but, also, tremendously shocked, disheartened and dismayed by the coldness of this statement. This was something that I had suspected but hoped against hope that I was wrong. As in the case of all industries in this country, the almighty dollar is the driving force of this one. In all of the courses I took, this remained quite apparent.”

From another, “The problem for me was that, for all of the time devoted to sales and marketing, not to mention discussions of ancient peoples’ burial practices, the intricacies of tort law, and the utter dissection of Mitch Albom’s *Tuesdays With Morrie*, there also was almost no mention of any non-traditional family relationships. The typical "client" always seemed to be middle to upper-middle class, loved by all family members, straight, religious and "traditional" in that they wanted a conventional funeral service. Never mind the rest of us.”

¹ “Lighting a Fire Under Mortuary Education,” <<http://www.funeralethics.org/spring05.pdf>>

“The embalming instructor often stepped up on her soap box to proclaim that we were doing the most sacred work known to man and that respect for the deceased was the utmost responsibility of the embalmer. I wonder how she missed the idea that some people's idea of sacred and respectful did not include plunging a trocar into their heart and lungs? By not teaching, or even allowing the idea of natural death care into the classroom, and even worse, by coyly implying that unembalmed bodies were potentially menaces to society, she sends class after class of mortuary practitioners out into the field with no foundation or inclination to provide assistance in caring for an unembalmed body. This perpetuates the idea that it is illegal, because no funeral director wants to experiment or learn on the job how this type of work should be done, so they say that it can not be done.”

“The one part of my mortuary education that bothers me the most is the fact that I had to go to those outside of the industry, to those who often oppose the practices of the industry, to learn how to care for families who come to me for help. While it does a nice little dance around Judaism, Islam and Hinduism in the religion course (all religions that specifically forbid embalming), there is no reason that a mortuary program could not include instruction on how to care for a body without embalming. The fact that the use of dry ice was a totally new concept to me when I saw it in the video “A Family Undertaking,” as I was about to graduate from mortuary school, is deeply disconcerting to me.”

Mortuary education amounts to incest with unwilling partners, partners who have no idea how to talk to each other, and both of whom seem stuck in practices and ideas that are 40 years out of date with no contemporary relevance whatsoever. **In order to be accredited by ABFSE, 60% of a mortuary school's students must pass the ICFSEB exam on the first try.** It's no wonder schools are teaching to the exam, and—in some cases—ignoring any other curriculum requirements.

In addition to the National Board Exam, its website states, “The Conference provides administrative support for some state examinations.” Vermont is among the 16 listed states,¹ and Carlson was eager to see what kind of state exam the Conference was giving to Vermonters. So she asked the Funeral Board administrator to request a copy of the exam. The Conference refused. One suspects it is the same exam that is given under the NBE title, as that is the only study guide suggested to students. Vermont's Board of Funeral Service requires new funeral director applicants to pass a test it has never seen in order to be licensed in the state of Vermont. What sense does that make?

States should be encouraged to eliminate mortuary school and the NBE as licensing requirements. A good liberal arts education, a one-year internship, and a real state-generated exam makes far more sense.

¹ ICFSEB claims to have state exams for Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Hawaii, Idaho, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, Nevada, Ohio, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont, and Washington.