

Cautionary Advice.....



from one pet owner to another

Cara Fernandez

I would like to provide a preface to this information. I am not focusing on my community and I am not soliciting business via this article. The issues addressed here impact pet owners across the United States and Canada. Before Kindred Hearts was even a dream, I was a pet owner. I still am. Before becoming a small business owner, I had a real problem with deceptive practices and exploiting people, especially when they are vulnerable. I still do.

Thank You, Cara

This is difficult, but important information to provide. In the United States, pet death care is a lucrative, multi-billion dollar a year industry. In all but a few states it is without any regulation, except landfill permits for pet cemeteries and air general permits for crematories or incinerators. My area within this Industry is pet cremation. This information is being provided from one pet owner to another. However, in this case, one of the pet owners is in the Trade.

I need to start with Human Death Care, which is regulated at the Federal, State and local levels. There are associations and boards that define actual procedures, standards of conduct and practice. When problems do occur, there are criminal, civil and administrative avenues to deal with the problems. Without explicit consent, human cremations are done privately or individually, both of which means: one body at a time. The reasons are simple. The first is to provide dignity and respect for the body of the departed loved one. The second is to limit, to the greatest extent possible, the commingling of cremated remains. (The simple, and indisputable, fact is that crematory manufactures have not been able to design a machine that can cremate more than one body within a single retort without significant commingling of remains.) In human death care, there are standardized terms, practices and procedures. Deceptive practices are not just frowned upon, they are illegal. Most of us are familiar with death care terms through our experiences with the death of other humans. In turn, a reasonable person would think, and is often lead to believe, that these same terms would apply to the same practices in regard to pet death care. I am sorry to tell you that they

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often do not. With no procedural regulations, no formal standards of practice or terminologies and no “big-brother” oversight for pet cremation services, well, the pet owner is on their own, at a very vulnerable time in their lives.

This is going to be a little graphic. Technically, cremation is defined as a process of reducing the deceased body of a human or animal to “basic elements”. Cremation is accomplished by exposing remains to extreme heat and flame, resulting in the process of “vaporization”. The end result of cremation takes the form of calcified bone fragments and a small amount of trace minerals. There are two important facts about cremation that need to be understood. First, cremation is a dynamic process. It involves literal jets of flame and massive air circulation. Additional turbulence occurs within the cremation chamber due to extreme heat and the combustion process itself. In essence, this means is that anything placed within the retort and cremated will commingle with anything else placed within the retort and cremated during a cremation. This holds true whether bodies are spaced, separated by firebrick or even in non-combustible pans. The second thing that needs to be understood is from a practical standpoint. A crematory is an incinerator, and it functions most cost efficiently (and that literally means cost per pound) when it is loaded at or near capacity. This holds true no matter the size of the machine, and there is a variety. Both points are of particular concern and importance in the unregulated pet death care industry.

In my opinion, the widely accepted standard of practice for pet cremation services is, simply, deceptive. From a pet owner’s perspective, I find it heartbreaking. As a person paying for a service, I would consider it fraudulent. It is conducted by both private businesses and non-profit organizations. It is the practice of cremating multiple companion animal bodies and referring to this service as a private or individual cremation. The rationale is creatively disturbing. The term “private cremation” may be used as an event, like a “private party”. Since it is their private cremation (party), they can include as many pets (guests) as are available or practical from a capacity standpoint. They can even continue to add pets (guests) as space within the retort becomes available during the private cremation (party). A “private cremation” could mean that the bodies aren’t stacked on top of each other; there is space left between bodies; or firebrick is used to separate the bodies. Thus, each body is

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allowed its own “private space” within the retort. An individual cremation may mean that each body is individually placed into the chamber; each body is allowed individual space within the retort; each body is in an individual container (usually meaning a combustible body bag) or individual portions of cremated remains are returned. At best, the integrity of the pet’s remains returned to the family is compromised. At times, the remains returned may contain only traces or literally nothing of the family’s companion.

Specific procedures are critical for any pet cremation service that is referred to as private or individual ...the first and most important being the placement of only one body in the retort for the duration of the cremation service. As a companion animal owner, red flags need to go up if a pet cremation provider uses only descriptive phrases for their services and provide no actual procedural information. Some of the phrases to watch for may be: private cremations are done individually; individual cremations are done privately; your pet is afforded privacy within the retort; for private cremations cremains are returned, for communal or disposal services they are not; and so on. A provider who conducts actual private or individual pet cremation services will have no problem providing procedural information, in writing.

Multiple body, segregated, partitioned or communal cremations are much less expensive to conduct and, if done properly, can provide a viable “representation” of the pet. However, there is nothing private or individual about this type of service, and there is no way to prevent high levels of commingling during the procedure. It is an option that should be available to pet owners. However, it is an option that should be called what it is, be fully explained and have procedural guidelines that are strictly followed.

Often, cremation services are arranged by and paid through a veterinary clinic. Beware of any consent form that is a blanket release of liability for the clinic and the cremation service provider. As a referring, and often profiting party, it is my strong belief that clinics, their staff and clinicians have an obligation to educate themselves about cremation, know the actual practices of the provider they are referring to and accurately

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provide this information to their client. This is particularly appropriate when many clinics charge their clients administrative or handling fees for arranging for the cremation, at times, well above the actual cost the clinic pays for the service. If your clinic works with a specific company for cremation services, remember that this is an agreement between the clinic and that company. The body of your companion animal belongs to you, not the clinic.

This is difficult information to provide, but it is information the companion animal owner needs to know. The “industry” will only change when pet owners start asking questions and demanding accurate service information in writing. In today’s world, the regulation of pet death care is not at the top of anyone’s list. For now, it is up to the pet owner to ask the tough questions, usually at a really difficult time in their life and make an informed decision on the care of their companion’s body.

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