

**SERBIAN COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION  
OF AUSTRALIA INC.**

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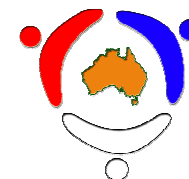
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**Death and Dying in  
the Serbian  
Community**



## Summary

This brochure was developed with the aim of providing an overview of Serbian tradition with regard to issues of death and dying in the Serbian community. We hope it will be utilised by aged care and other service providers in order to deliver culturally appropriate services to people of Serbian background.

We would like to acknowledge the diversity of our culture and we should not assume that all the features outlined in the brochure would apply to everyone. Therefore it is important to treat each Serbian as an individual and appreciate everyone's individuality.

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## Funeral arrangements

Given the importance of commemorating death and dying in the Serbian tradition, very often elderly Serbian people and their family would have discussed some of the arrangements regarding the funeral and burial site. Thus, it is essential to contact family members with regards to funeral arrangements, as funeral customs are determined by the wishes of the family. For those that belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church, burial practices and ceremonies are conducted in accordance with the Orthodox Religion, which does not allow for cremation. Many Serbian families want funeral arrangements to be made by specific funeral directors who are familiar with Serbian traditions. It is not uncommon for the body of the deceased to be flown back to their country of origin for burial.

## Grieving Process

As a sign of respect, the deceased's partner and immediate family do not listen to music or attend celebrations for one year.

Amongst female mourners, black clothes may be worn for one year or for life. Men may sometimes not shave for forty days or longer and they might wear a black arm band as a sign of mourning. This helps people recognise the loss of the mourners and to offer condolence and support.

However, the grieving process amongst some Serbian people in Australia could be different and could be reflected in different ways. Thus, it is up to an individual to decide on following the tradition.

The concept of euthanasia is not generally well received in the Serbian community. However, it is ultimately an individual decision that some people may support.

Organ donation is not common in the Serbian community as the Orthodox Church teaches that the body should remain whole at burial; exiting the world as it entered

### **Religion**

Most Serbian people are of the Eastern Orthodox faith. However, there are some people who belong to other churches such as Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses etc. Thus, it is important to consult with the family and to establish each person's wish in the event of palliative care or death according to their customs and beliefs.

### **Dying in a Hospital or Aged Care Facility**

When a person is near death, a priest is often called to say a prayer against the person's suffering and to hear their Holy Confession. Upon death in the hospital or aged care facility, a priest is called again to say a prayer for the soul of the deceased. The closest family members will stay by the deceased's side immediately after death for a period of 24 hrs or until the body is transferred to the morgue.

### **Death and Dying issues and the Serbian tradition**

Similarly to other communities, the subject of death and dying is a very sensitive issue in the Serbian community, particularly when a person is diagnosed with a terminal illness.

Amongst Serbian people, family is responsible for caring for their family members and extended family. The elderly are respected, with many of them relying on family to support and care for them. In order to prevent a sense of abandonment and exclusion from their family and community, strong family involvement is vital during times of illness.

The concept of hospice and palliative care is not acknowledged in Serbia, where dealing with terminally ill people has been a family responsibility. Thus, most Serbian elders have little understanding of what it means .

In the Serbian Community, it is preferred that the terminally ill person dies in the family home. However, if the person is in palliative care at the hospital or aged care facility, family members make a constant effort to visit and care for them.

It is general practice for Serbian families to withhold informing the dying person of their diagnosis in an effort not to burden them. Therefore, Serbian families prefer to be informed of the diagnosis before deciding whether to notify the ill person.

### **Communication of diagnosis and prognosis**

News of diagnosis and prognosis is normally given to the family. According to the family hierarchy, traditionally husband or the eldest son is consulted regarding the diagnosis and is responsible for decision making. The family then passes this on to relatives and friends.

### **Effective Communication**

Due to a lack of English language skills amongst the elderly, it is important to engage professional interpreters in order to communicate effectively with the family and explain palliative care. This is predominantly because family members are often too distressed to be able to interpret efficiently. Having an interpreter provides for better communication between the service provider and the family.

### **Family role**

Generally, the family make a decision on behalf of the dying person with regard to treatment.

In order to lessen distress and boredom, family and friends provide a strong support system. Despite the support they provide, this network of people tend to express a pessimistic attitude; viewing illness and death as being very negative and tragic.

### **Role of health professionals and volunteers**

The role of doctors and nurses is highly regarded in the Serbian community. It is expected for doctors to communicate with regard to diagnosis and prognosis, while nurses provide ongoing nursing care, in an attempt to help ease the pain of those who are ill.

Family and friends usually provide all the support needed and most Serbian families do not require the assistance of social workers and volunteers as they are not familiar with the services they provide.

It is important for professionals to show compassion and understanding, which includes having their body language reflect the words they are saying.

### **General attitude towards treatment and dying options**

Many Serbian people avoid using the word “cancer”, as well as pointing to its location. It is more acceptable to describe the position of a cancer in words.

While there are no restrictions in taking particular medicines, the administration of morphine is seen in correlation with being “near the end”, which tends to increase anxiety.