

## Why aren't politicians facing the other big inevitable topic?

by Gillian Boyes, Chief Executive, Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand

Taxes are getting a lot of focus in this year's election. But that other big inevitable, death, remains the topic MPs seem steadfastly keen to ignore.

During Covid, it was only the sustained pressure from our Association and others in the industry on behalf of our families that saw relief from the pain of a complete ban on even private funeral services in Level 4. Frustratingly, we had to fight the battle a second time when funeral limits were initially retained at 10 people in Level 2. We can only hope the lessons learned reports include deathcare provisions as well as healthcare ones.

The Burials and Cremations Act was written in 1964 and its outdated focus on burials, outmoded systems for recording deaths and burials, and the lack of cultural and spiritual considerations led to recognition that a true first principles law reform was needed.

Despite a Law Commission review that began in 2010 recommending 127 changes, hundreds of thousands of dollars (if not probably more) consultancy support for the Ministry of Health and years of consultation with industry and stakeholders, that review has now been quietly shelved.

Justification includes that some non-legislative changes have been made such as online death documents. That was back in 2017. What about the need to recognise modern disposal technologies like water cremation that might offer more sustainable disposal techniques? Or a workable low-cost regulatory system for funeral directors that stops cowboys working out of garages with little to no supervision by anyone?

Access to reasonable welfare support at death through the Work and Income Funeral Grant is the other topic MPs have now spent 20 years avoiding addressing.

Currently \$2445.37 against an average modest funeral cost of \$7,500 - \$10,000, the WINZ Funeral Grant is set at an amount most New Zealanders would agree is woefully inadequate. Research shows time and again that participating in the rituals, ceremonies and support of a funeral helps manage grief and mental health, but for many families this choice is taken away.

The WINZ grant is only available to the most vulnerable and while raising it to our recommended \$7,000 (close to the current ACC Funeral Grant of \$7491.95) would cost an additional \$20M per year, the mental health and wellbeing benefits it could provide would be a fraction of the \$3B plus set aside in Budget 2023 for 'cost-of-living' provisions or the \$3.6B for health and disability.

Perhaps cost of living issues will always continue to trump cost of dying ones. And perhaps improving outcomes around death will never be a giant vote-winner. But what other topic has a potential positive impact on every single New Zealander?

Isn't it time politicians faced up to death?

The Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand is a membership body representing around 75% of funeral directors in New Zealand. Members abide by ethical principles and standards and the Association provides training, advocacy and support as well as a complaints service for the public.