

# Options

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## Cost, convention, crisis

Alison Rector of Monroe is president of the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Maine, which, according to its website, promotes “simplicity, dignity and economy in funeral arrangements through advance planning.”

FCAM provides information, support and resources regardless of the type of funeral families desire, Rector said.

“If someone wants to have a fancy, elaborate funeral and work with a funeral director, that’s fine,” she said.

The organization provides practical advice and tools for clarifying last wishes and planning after-death care as well as legal information and cost guidelines.

Rector said many Mainers contact the organization in crisis, after a sudden death or in sticker shock after learning how much a standard funeral will cost — \$7,200 is the national average, not including a cemetery plot, a memorial stone and other costs. In many cases, she said, natural burial options do cost substantially less than a conventional funeral.

But, she added, “many of the people we hear from are already looking for unconventional choices,” such as the kind of information Last Things provides.

“We’re trying to get people to think ahead, to talk with their family members so it isn’t a crisis situation,” she said.

FCAM encourages all con-

sumers to shop around, as they would for any other service. In 2011, the organization surveyed about 75 funeral service providers in Maine about the cost of 12 specific services, finding substantial differences. For example, the cost of embalming ranged from \$250 to \$395 and the cost of a funeral ceremony ranged from \$300 to \$625.

According to a recent article in the New York Times, a national survey of funeral directors found that the median cost of a whole-body funeral in 2014 was about \$7,200. The cost jumped to \$8,500 with the inclusion of a concrete vault at burial, which many conventional cemeteries require. The same survey found that the median cost of a funeral service after cremation was about \$6,100. These prices do not include the cost of a burial plot, which typically costs between \$500 and \$2,000.

## Composting yourself

“More and more people are exploring the idea of natural burial,” Chuck Lakin said. “They’re not really interested in putting an embalmed body in a metal casket inside a sealed concrete vault in a conventional cemetery, thinking they’re somehow shielding the body from decomposition. It’s ridiculous; you can’t do it.”

By contrast, he said, in a natural burial, “the plain pine box decomposes, you decompose and all the nutrients go back into the soil for other things to grow with. You’re basically composting yourself.”

Lakin builds his simple wooden coffins in his basement workshop using pine, plywood or other woods.



Chuck Lakin, a retired reference librarian, demonstrates how to build a simple “toe pincher” coffin in his basement workshop in Waterville. “I’m not trying to sell anything,” he said. “I just want to give out information like a reference librarian would.”

Models include a basic rectangular box and lid, one with flared sides, one that can be used as a bookshelf until it’s needed for a burial and one that comes apart and collapses neatly for storage. He also makes a popular oblong “toe-pincher” model like those seen in old westerns. Handles are made of rope or wood, and all models can be constructed without the use of metal fasteners, in keeping with requirements for a Jewish burial or for interment in a green cemetery.

Lakin’s prices range from

about \$300 for a toe-pincher to about \$875 for a collapsible version held together with wooden wedges. But for the more hands-on types, Lakin provides free do-it-yourself plans on the Last Things website and offers one-on-one coffin-building workshops in his basement.

He takes a practical tone in inviting people to consider building their own coffin. “After all, there’s only one other thing besides taxes you can count on,” reads his workshop page on the Last Things site. “Imagine the fun you’ll have going

to work on Monday, just to ask how you spent your waiting for the first person weekend.”

# Noonan

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the problem area, and when the doctor gives a quick push, the table drops. This allows the doctor to deliver a thrust to the joint that is quicker and gentler than the typical manual style. The resistance can be set by the doctor, with settings ranging from strong resistance for a healthy, sturdy man to a very gentle drop for an elderly patient.

But even that style of manipulation can be too much for some patients. Even gentler is a hand-held tool that delivers a thrust into the joint. Some are motorized, to give a series of thrusts; others are “single shot” designs. What they have in common is the tool’s thrust is much faster than any done by hand, and it also can be more precisely controlled. Because of this, the amount of force needed is much less. This style is often used on seniors, young children, patients in acute pain or those who are really nervous about manipulation.

I recently had a patient in his 80s who had disc surgery in his neck, including a fusion many years ago. Because of his condition, we chose not to do any manual manipulation, or even a drop style, but only used the hand-held tool. He has done very well with this treatment; not only is the pain much better, his neck mobility has increased quite a bit. He feels he is a safer driver now because of the treat-

ment (although I haven’t checked with his wife to see if she agrees).

Yet another style of treatment involves traction for the low back; this is especially useful for back arthritis, any type of pinched nerve such as sciatica, spinal stenosis and disc injuries. In this treatment, the patient is lying face down and the ankles are strapped to the foot of the table. The sections of the table between the abdomen and the pelvis are gently separated, which gives some traction. Then the doctor releases a lock that allows the foot section of the table to be lowered towards the floor, flexing the hips and spine. The doctor holds a pressure against the spine, causing a controlled traction to the low back. For many patients, this is their favorite part of the treatment; if I forget to do it, they remind me.

So don’t let fear of manipulation keep you from getting care. While not all doctors use all these alternative style treatments, we are all trained in alternative ways of treating patients with histories of fracture, surgery or osteo-

porosis. And manipulation is very safe; one study that compared the safety of this treatment to NSAIDs (anti-inflammatory drugs such as aspirin, ibuprofen, Celebrex, etc.) found manipulation to be literally several hundred times safer

than these drugs.

Dr. Michael Noonan practices chiropractic, chiropractic acupuncture and other wellness therapies in Old Town. He can be reached at noonanchiropractic@gmail.com.

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# Care

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Lori Parham, director of AARP for Maine, said the law is part of a national strategy aimed at improving working conditions and support for both professional and lay caregivers. Similar laws have been enacted in at least 17 other states, she said.

There are more than 178,000 unpaid caregivers providing support to elderly Mainers, according to a recent AARP survey.

“Too often there is a disconnect between the acute care setting and the community environment,” Parham said. “This law is in place to give family caregivers more information, to help them when they bring a loved one home from the hospital.”

AARP provides many resources for family caregivers, including the downloadable publication “Prepare to Care: A Resource Guide for Families.”



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