

# Home-Based Viewing (El Velorio) After Death: A Cost-Effective Alternative for Some Families

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After the death of a loved one, giving an opportunity to view the body helps bring families and friends together to celebrate the life and mourn the passing of a person. This gathering, known as a Wake or a Viewing, precedes the burial and usually lasts from 1 to several days. In the United States, the viewing now takes place in funeral parlors, away from the decedent's home. However, there are still several countries and people who keep the body at home where the family and friends are invited to say their goodbyes. We present here 2 cases for which our

Hospice assisted the families with a home viewing. These were indigent people who could not afford embalming or the additional cost of a viewing in a parlor and who, without this opportunity, would have not had time to get together and mourn and celebrate life as friends, family, and community.

**Keywords:** Velorio; viewing; indigent burial; home viewing; home funeral; cost effective

## Case Presentations

### Case 1

Case 1 was a 3-year-old Hispanic female diagnosed with Cerebral Lipidosis. Her parents are from Guatemala and live locally in a house with at least another family. All are below the poverty level. Our Hospice provided palliative care for the child and support for the family for approximately 3 years. When death was imminent, we offered the assistance in arranging a "viewing" at home to give the family and friends an opportunity to pay their respects. They agreed. At the time of death, friends of the family first bathed and dressed the remains. Parents are not allowed to do this. It is a way to show that they are not in "agreement" with death. We

helped them purchase dry ice and provided electric fans. We taught the parents how to lay the child over the cooling materials. The air conditioner was set to the lowest temperature possible. Our social worker, chaplain, and music therapist provided their services, and the family kept the body at home for 2 days.

The mourning process involved visitation from family and friends as well as prayer sessions that lasted as long as 4 hours at a time. While they offered food to visitors, the family fasted on coffee and bread. A bowl was placed near the body for donations.

On the day of the funeral, the parents packed the child's clothing, toys, and special belongings and buried them in the grave.

Months after the funeral, the parents remark on how this ritual made the grief process more tolerable.

### Case 2

Case 2 was a 9-month-old Hispanic male diagnosed with Congenital Hydrocephalus. One parent, the mother, is from Guatemala and the other from Mexico. They lived below the poverty level and could only afford indigent burial. At the time of the child's death, our social worker and chaplain assisted with the bathing and dressing of the child. He was placed

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in a bassinette next to a small altar, which was lit with multiple candles. The parents also took turns holding and caressing the child. Family members and friends were given an opportunity to come and pay their respects.

After a few hours, the funeral home was called and the body was taken away. The mother attended grief counseling for several months and, like the little girl's parents, had fond memories of the ritual.

## Discussion

Watching the Spanish movie "VOLVER" by Pedro Almodovar (Sony Pictures), one is reminded of an ages-old custom that is very much alive in La Mancha, Spain, Don Quixote's birthplace, and throughout the world: The Viewing. In Spanish-speaking countries, it is called a Velorio. It is a period of time after the death of a person during which the body is kept at home and the family, friends, and community come by to pray, cry, and celebrate the life of the loved one. In countries like Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, and many others, it is still customary to keep the body at home.<sup>1-3</sup> This time is an opportunity for families and friends to reunite and re-establish bonds. It also strengthens community bonds. After the death, neighbors come to the house and assist with chores and with dressing the body. In the United States, wakes, or viewings, have moved from the home to the Funeral Parlor. I believe this change can be traced to 2 developments: First, the discovery of embalming, a procedure intended mostly to preserve a body to have it transported over long distances without decomposing, and, second, the removal of death from the home to the hospitals and convalescent facilities, which resulted from the passing of the Hill Burton Act.

Embalming was developed in the 1800s, during the Civil War, as a way to preserve bodies until they could be transported to the state from which they came.<sup>4,5</sup> In the 1940s, The Hill Burton Act allowed for partial funding of the cost of building hospitals. As a result, between 1946 and 1968, over 2000 new hospitals were built.<sup>6</sup> This had 2 measurable effects: It helped to remove healthcare from the ambulatory setting to institutions. This was, at the time, a win-win situation. Doctors had increased access to technology and, rather than limiting the number of patients they could see on house calls, it increased access by concentrating patients in 1 location. Now, however, more people died away from home, and the whole process of bereavement was almost totally

relegated to the funeral home. The growth of the funeral industry has perpetuated this phenomenon. A funeral can be quite costly.

Every aspect of the funeral—choice of casket, amount of flowers, amount of viewing time, embalming, tent over coffin, and so on—has its own cost. The average funeral costs approximately \$5000 to \$6000.<sup>7</sup> There are well-documented abuses of people's vulnerability at such a fragile time, which have prompted the Federal Trade Commission to regulate the industry.<sup>8,9</sup>

Home viewings are legal in most states, however, and may represent a cost-effective alternative for families with limited financial resources.<sup>10</sup> In our 2 cases, it gave the families time to gather and say goodbye and, as a result, have a fuller bereavement and closure experience. Our Hospice serves a very poor, often indigent, Spanish American community. Many of these people are illegal aliens who can barely make ends meet. When a loved one dies, this stretches their finances beyond their means and they must resort to the least expensive method of burial, usually through community services for the indigent. This means foregoing the traditional viewing, which can cost as much as \$200.00 per hour.

We recommend that Social Workers and Hospice personnel familiarize themselves with home viewings and consider recommending them to families as an alternative to the traditional, more expensive, method; particularly if they have limited financial resources.

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