



# Death Rituals Reported by White, Black, and Hispanic Parents Following the ICU Death of an Infant or Child

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Cremation

**Purpose** To examine rituals (disposing remains, wakes, funerals/burials, celebrations) of White, Black, Hispanic parents post ICU infant/child death.

**Design and methods:** Qualitative design, 63 parents completed English or Spanish semi-structured interviews at 7 & 13 months after infant's/child's death. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and entered into Atlas.ti for analysis. An inductive approach to thematization was used to develop codes.

**Results:** Parents: mean age 35.1 years (SD = 9.03); 33% Black, 27% White, 40% Hispanic; from 17 countries. Three themes emerged: immediately after death - shock and stress, needing help with arrangements, decisions on burial or cremation (conflicts due to finances, religion, culture), when and where to hold wakes, funerals/burials. Wakes and funerals - who prepares child's body, appropriate dress (deceased child, mourners), who can come (cultural restrictions),-variations by child age, parent choice, culture, religion, country. After burial/cremation - being with family, milestone celebrations.

**Conclusion:** Child death is devastating for parents, other children, grandparents, and family members. Practice Implications. Rituals after child death require decisions about the child's remains, wakes, funerals/burials at time of great pain for parents. This is especially true for newly immigrated parents and those with language barriers where making arrangements is especially hard and often very isolating. Health professionals who provide support need to be cognizant of practice differences based on religion, culture, economics, family traditions, and individual preference and provide as much support and resource as possible. A list of religious leaders representing the community's cultures and funeral service providers who may provide lower cost burials/cremations is helpful.

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## Background

Ritual Practices after the death of a loved one, including dealing with the deceased's remains, wakes, funerals, burials and gathering celebrations, differ across cultures, religions, race and ethnicity and ages of the deceased. These rituals help those who remain acknowledge the death, deal

with their grief, accept the loss, maintain a connection with the deceased, and continue their own functioning (Gudmundsdottir & Chesla, 2006; Weeks, 2004). The most common rituals after death are the wake or viewing, memorial service, funeral or cremation and celebrations of the deceased's life (Reeves, 2011). However, the literature on death rituals is limited; much of it is dated and focuses on adult deaths. Reports of ritual practices after infant or child death are very limited.

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The purpose of this qualitative (phenomenology) study was to examine the ritual practices, including dealing with the deceased's remains, wake, funeral, burial and celebrations, of White non-Hispanic, Black non-Hispanic, and Hispanic/Latino parents at 7 and 13 months post the ICU death of an infant or child. Because reports of rituals following child death are so limited providing a context for death rituals requires a review of rituals following adult deaths as well.

### Wakes or Viewings

In many cultures after death of a loved one the family holds a wake or viewing of the deceased in the family home, funeral home or in a church prior to the funeral and burial. Ritual practices for wakes or viewings differ by cultures and by generations within a culture. Practices adhered to by older members of the cultural group are often no longer done by younger members. Preparing the deceased's body for wakes or funerals is one example. In the African American and Afro-Caribbean cultures dressing the dead loved one in a respectful way is an important aspect of death rituals. The body is washed, dressed and the hair is groomed by the family. More recently professional undertakers have been given these tasks for many families, especially the younger generation. It is customary to have open caskets for viewing at the wake and/or church service (Moore, 2003). Laying-on of hands, touching, kissing, and conveying one's grief by viewing the remains are important and have been passed down the generations (Holloway, 2002). Food served is as essential as the conversations and recollections that family and friends bring with them to the family home. The tradition of providing meals to the grieving family starts with the wake and concludes with a formal meal after the funeral service.

In the Hispanic culture, dominated by Catholicism, mourning begins with an open casket service, during which a rosary is recited (Clements et al., 2003). Group prayers are done for the soul of the deceased 1 to 2 evenings before the funeral service. Holy water or oil is sprinkled on the body and a pastor is asked to say prayers to guide the deceased (Diaz-Cabello, 2004). The wake or "*velorios*" may be held after the burial where friends and family gather in the house of the deceased or in a near place for 24 hours.

For Mexican-Americans the wake provides a collective sharing of grief and mourning where family members and friends pay their respects to the deceased and offer condolences (Parry & Shen Ryan, 1995). Women lead the prayers, invite family members to attend, and prepare food and drink for after the wake. Women grieve openly; men do not express their grief or display emotions openly due to the "machismo" tradition.

### Funerals or Cremations

Funeral practices also differ widely. Family members and friends in many cultures travel long distances to attend a funeral and provide support to the grieving family (Clements et al., 2003). In the Latino, African American and Afro-Caribbean cultures attending the funeral of family

members is considered a family obligation (Schoulte, 2011). For other families newly immigrated to the US, family members may live in the native country and not be able to attend the burial, leaving the newly immigrated family members feeling alone and isolated (Contro, Davies, Larson, & Sourkes, 2010). In many cultures it is customary to stay with the family until after the burial. During burial flowers are thrown on the coffin with kisses in some cultures while in others handfuls of dirt are thrown on the coffin by each family member and friend.

The significance of involving the community in the African American funeral ceremony dates to West African cultures that saw the death and burial as an important, public, elaborate, and lengthy social event (Atkins, 2012; Holloway, 2002). Today elaborate funerals demonstrating the deceased's importance and worth are common especially for famous, well known people (Hope, 2010). In Black funerals, there is often strong, loud and unrelieved weeping and wailing. There are nurses, the church deaconesses or church mothers dressed in white (sometimes black), who stand near the bereaved family with tissues and fans, ready to aide a mourner or ease the fall of the faint. African American funerals are often hours longer than those of White Americans.

In Jamaica, where African and European religious and cultural traditions have blended, funerals are routinely held 2–3 weeks after the death to provide time for elaborate preparations and for family and friends to arrive (Paul, 2007). Family members of the deceased hold the "nine nights" celebration. People come from miles away singing and dancing to the home of the deceased. Song and drink are central to the 9 night ceremony. Songs are sung 3 days after the death, 9 nights after the death and 40 days after the death by family and friends or by a professional 9 nights singing group (Burrell, 1996). The deceased's spirit is believed to roam for 40 days; the singing placates the spirit of the deceased.

In accordance with African American beliefs, a body cannot be cremated because it will prevent the soul from going to heaven (Lobar, Youngblut & Brooten, 2006). However, in a comparison of Blacks and Whites, 25 older and 25 middle aged adults were interviewed to assess their views on management of a family member's body after death (Glass & Samuel, 2011). The investigators found that the use of cremation is becoming more common due to cost and land use. Reasons against cremation were: contrary to religious beliefs; absence of closure; and lack of a sense of place. Moreover, some participants were against it because it was not part of their family traditions.

In the Hispanic culture a church funeral mass is conducted followed by a procession to the grave site where a service is performed. The grave is blessed before burial with holy water by a priest or deacon. Mexican-American family members make every effort to attend the funeral even if they live far away (Parry & Shen Ryan, 1995). The family expects to have a large funeral to demonstrate how much

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