

The admissibility of new techniques of disposing of the dead

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Executive summary

Health Council of the Netherlands



The Corpse Disposal Act states that the bodies of our dead must be disposed of properly. The Act permits burial, cremation, donation to science, and – in exceptional cases – burial at sea. However, new techniques are now becoming available. These include alkaline hydrolysis, in which bodies are dissolved in a heated liquid. In light of these developments, the Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations has asked the Health Council to formulate an assessment framework that can be used to assess the admissibility of new ways of disposing of the dead.

The guiding principles underpinning this advisory report

A Health Council committee, specially created for the purpose, has examined this ethically, religiously, and socially sensitive issue. In accordance with the request for advice, the Committee has confined itself to the narrow

definition of ‘disposal of the dead’, as just one element of a funeral process that involves numerous ritual practices. Information from various sources leads the Committee to conclude that it is important to society that the bodies of our dead are disposed of respectfully. Existing legislative and regulatory frameworks and accepted practices provide a useful starting point. These encapsulate widely shared principles. Ongoing debates in politics and society, both at national and international level, also provide guiding principles for formulating an assessment framework. After examining all of these aspects in context, the Committee has identified three values – safety, dignity, and sustainability – and has formulated a set of conditions that must be met before a new technique for the disposal of the dead can be considered admissible. These values and conditions are summarised in Table 1 on page 4.

The assessment of new techniques

According to the Committee, alkaline hydrolysis meets the proposed conditions. It concludes that sufficient evidence is available to establish that, in principle, this new technique for the disposal of the dead compares favourably to burial and cremation with respect to sustainability. However, the technical specifications would have to be further assessed before this technique could potentially be authorised. Another way of disposing of the dead that is the focus of growing interest is human composting. Here, the body of the deceased individual is placed in a carbon-rich material, where it is decomposed by bacteria and converted into a stable and fertile compost. The process can involve a technical component, to a greater or lesser degree. The Committee concludes that the available information on human composting is, as yet, insufficient to facilitate an assessment based on the conditions specified within the assessment framework.



Table 1. Framework for assessing new techniques of disposing of the dead

Value	Condition	Description
Safety	Guaranteed technical safety	The techniques used must be sound and must pose no risk to operators or to others in the immediate vicinity.
	No emission of high-risk agents	The decomposition process must not involve the release of any agents in concentrations that are harmful to people and the environment.
Dignity	Guaranteed decomposition of the body	The decomposition of the body must be effective, leaving no more than the skeleton.
	No unintentional mixing of bodies and their remains	When disposing of the dead, it must be possible to link bodies and their remains to a specific individual.
	The decomposition process must be shielded from public perception	The decomposition of the body must not generate any unpleasant odours, nor should it be visible to anyone in the vicinity.
	Guaranteed integrity of bodies and their remains	Steps must be taken to prevent the misappropriation – or other improper use – of the deceased individual's body and bodily remains.
Sustainability	Reduced use of finite resources	The procedure's technical features and implementation must consume smaller amounts of finite resources than would be the case with burial and cremation.
	Fewer harmful emissions	The technical implementation of this procedure must emit lower levels of harmful substances than burial and cremation.
	Reduced use of available space	The procedure for disposing of the dead should take up less space than burial.



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