

Is it OK for a doctor to attend a patient's funeral?

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New research at the University of Adelaide has shed light on how many doctors are attending the funerals of their patients and the reasons behind their choice. The researchers say more needs to be done within the medical profession to openly discuss the issue.

In a study published online ahead of print in the journal *Death Studies*, researchers from the University's School of Psychology and School of Medicine report on the practices and [attitudes](#) towards funeral attendance of more than 430 Australian doctors. The publication is part of a nationwide survey of more than 1000 [health professionals](#).

"Our survey was aimed at better understanding what motivates health professionals to attend their patients' funerals, what barriers they may experience in attending, and their attitudes towards the issue of funeral attendance," says Dr Sofia Zambrano, who conducted this work as a follow up to her PhD in the School of Medicine at the University of Adelaide.

The survey found that 57% of the doctors surveyed had attended at least one funeral of a patient – but the number varied greatly depending on which medical specialisation they had pursued. For example: 71% of general practitioners had attended a patient's funeral; 67% of oncologists; 67% of psychiatrists; 63% of palliative medicine specialists; 52% of surgeons and 22% of intensive care specialists.

"The death of a patient can be a very emotional and isolating experience

for physicians, and some may regard it as the ultimate failure of their professional care," says Associate Professor Greg Crawford, study co-author and Associate Professor of Palliative Medicine in the University's School of Medicine.

He says the benefits of attendance may be twofold: "Funeral attendance seems to be a practice that may help physicians deal with their emotions after a patient dies, and in turn it can also be of comfort for the patient's family.

"However, there are differing views within medicine about whether or not it's acceptable to attend a patient's funeral, with some doctors seeing it as 'unprofessional', and others feeling that their colleagues would disapprove of them attending, which in fact were factors associated to non-attendance to funerals in our study," Associate Professor Crawford says.

The study also found that female doctors were more likely to attend a patient's funeral than their male counterparts, were more open to crying and expressing grief at the funeral, and they actively discussed attending [patients'](#) funerals with their colleagues and families. Those who were least likely to attend were young male doctors with fewer years of medical experience.

Dr Zambrano says that because the decision is a personal one, the paper's authors have refrained from advocating attendance or non-attendance at funerals. "We aim to contribute to a more open discussion about this poorly researched topic, and to provide a clearer picture of actual practices and attitudes of a large sample of physicians and other health professionals," she says.

"The role of peer perception and the hesitation of doctors to discuss funeral attendance and death more broadly with colleagues are important

issues to consider. The medical community should ask itself whether funeral attendance needs to – and can – be addressed more openly, whether death and dying should be discussed more candidly among health professionals, and what effects these discussions may have on job satisfaction and on the mental health of medical practitioners."

More information: Sofia C. Zambrano et al. Attending Patient Funerals: Practices and Attitudes of Australian Medical Practitioners, *Death Studies* (2016). [DOI: 10.1080/07481187.2016.1214631](https://doi.org/10.1080/07481187.2016.1214631)

Provided by University of Adelaide

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