Health News you Can Use

New Options for After-Death Care

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When our lives draw to a close, the last decision to be made about our bodies is how to lay them to rest. Until very recently, this has come down to choosing between only two options, unless one donated one's body to science: burial, or traditional cremation. But two years ago, two newer options were legalized in Maryland and are now available in our area - alkaline hydrolysis and natural organic reduction. Each of these is much more environmentally friendly than traditional burial or flame cremation. In addition to these completely new processes, the options for in-ground burial have expanded with the addition of two green cemeteries that have very recently opened in our area. So effectively, our options for after-death care have doubled.

Alkaline hydrolysis, also known as water cremation or aquamation, is a method using an alkaline solution that breaks down the soft tissues of the body into simple molecules that can be safely discharged into the municipal wastewater system within a few hours. The bones are pulverized, just as they are after traditional (flame) cremation, and returned to the family as cremains.

Natural organic reduction, sometimes called human composting, is a process that speeds up the process of natural decomposition in a closed chamber under controlled conditions. It is completed in several weeks. The result looks like finely shredded mulch. Small amounts of this are typically returned to the family, similar to cremains, and the rest can be donated to local parks or forest restoration projects as rich soil.

Green cemeteries require biodegradable shrouds or caskets, without the use of vaults or liners, and utilize only small natural stone markers instead of large headstones.

More details about each of these options, why they are judged more environmentally friendly, and where you can find them at present, can be found on the website of FCAME, the Funeral Consumers Alliance of Maryland and Environs: <mdfunerals.org>.