

Title: Cemetery Exhumation
Policy No: 357
Responsibility: Director Technical Services

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2			
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4			

Policy

Council will undertake exhumations at cemeteries under its control in accordance with the following procedure.

**EXHUMATION FROM
A GRAVE OR VAULT**

Applicable To:	All Persons entering a grave, including cemetery staff, contractors and funeral directors.
Authorised By:	Dave Perry, Superintendent of Cemeteries
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PROCEDURE No 1: EXHUMATION FROM A GRAVE OR VAULT

1. THE AIM OF THE PROCEDURE

The aim of this procedure is to provide the method, equipment, documentation and precautions required for persons undertaking the exhumation of human remains from a grave or vault. The procedure aims to ensure that such exhumations are carried out with dignity and respect for the deceased and for their families and loved ones.

The procedure highlights the need for any person entering a grave to have the national “Confined Spaces” certification and to have the appropriate training in, to supply and to use trench shoring equipment as per Australian Standards.

2. APPLICATION OF THE PROCEDURE

This procedure applies to all exhumations undertaken at the Thorak Regional Cemetery, the Darwin General Cemetery and any other cemetery under Council’s management.

The procedure applies to cemetery staff, whether Council employees or contractors, funeral directors, employees of funeral homes, or any other person who has cause to enter a grave for the purpose of undertaking or assisting with an exhumation.

3. LEGISLATIVE REQUIREMENTS

All exhumations must be carried out in accordance with the prevailing *Northern Territory Cemeteries Act*. Section 30D of this Act currently states:

“30D. Consent to exhumation and removal of remains.

- (1) If satisfied in respect of the matters referred to in section 30C (3), the Minister may give written consent to the applicant to exhume and remove the remains.*
- (2) The Minister may specify conditions in respect of the exhumation or removal in the instrument of consent.*
- (3) A person given consent under this section must comply with conditions specified in the instrument of consent.*

Penalty: 200 penalty units or 12 months imprisonment.

All exhumations must comply with the clause and all other requirements noted in the Act. An exhumation or removal of remains cannot proceed without the written consent of the relevant Minister of the Northern Territory Government.

4. 'CONFINED SPACE' STATUS AND SHORING REQUIREMENTS

The Darwin City Council has assessed a grave as a 'confined space'. By having 'confined space' status, anyone entering a grave for whatever purpose must comply with the requirements of Australian Standards *AS/NZS 2865 -2005: Safe Working in a Confined Spaces*. This also dictates that persons entering a grave are certified in trench shoring and that appropriate shoring equipment is supplied and used. A *Grave Entry Permit* (Attachment Two) will need to be completed for each exhumation.

5. PROCEDURE

1. Obtain an Exhumation Works Order including all other paperwork related to an exhumation, e.g. copies of the Letter of Application, letter from the Minister and the Exhumation Form (See 'Attachment A' to this procedure).
2. Review the letter from the Minister and check that the relevant approval for the exhumation has been provided.
3. Begin completing the Exhumation Form with the known details.
4. Check the Exhumation Order for the time, date, grave location & removal details.
5. Locate and mark the grave site. Have a second person check and confirm the location is correct. Ascertain if a memorial exists over the gravesite that will require prior removal.
6. The depth of the excavation will be determined by documentation regarding previous burials in the allotted grave site.
7. If documentation does not clarify the depth of existing burials, it may be necessary to undertake a grave probe. To undertake a grave probe, a metal rod of 10mm to 25mm diameter and up to 2.0 metres in length is required. Using water to lubricate a hole into the grave, the probing rod should be forced into the ground in a part of the grave where a previous interment is likely to be placed. Where the previous interment was that of an adult, the preferred location for probing a grave is in the centre of the grave. Where the previous burial was that of a child, the preferred location for probing a grave is 750mm out from the cemetery beam in the middle of the plot. The resistance on the probe will change as it impacts the coffin of the previous burial. By measuring the depth on the rod when the resistance alters it is possible to determine the depth of the previous burial and the depth to which the next burial position should be excavated. The probe should be cleaned after the process and the ground reinstated.

NOTE:

At Darwin General Cemetery, past practice has been that the first depth in a grave, that is the shallowest burial 1.8m less the normal height of the coffin.

At Thorak Regional Cemetery, the practice has been to have three burial depths;

- i). the third depth (the deepest) is approximately 2.8 metres less the height of the coffin;
- ii). the second (the middle depth) of which is 2.3 metres less the height of the coffin; and
- iii). the first depth (the shallowest) is 1.8 metres less the height of the coffin.

8. If the depth of previous of burials in the grave cannot be determined, it must be assumed that there is a burial at the first depth with digging to proceed on this assumption. If no burial is found at the first depth, it is then to be assumed that there is a burial at the second depth.
9. A minimum of three cemetery staff, including the excavator or backhoe operator must be present for an exhumation. One of these staff must be designated "The Observer". "The Observer" must always remain outside the grave and must have either a mobile telephone or a two-way radio available for the purpose of contacting emergency services if required.
10. Position the excavating machinery and trailer and commence excavation for a normal grave.

Note: Care must be taken to avoid excavating too far and intruding upon existing burials in the grave. The Observer must monitor the hole being dug and guide the excavator/backhoe operator to ensure that this does not happen. If there are any concerns about intruding upon an existing burial in a grave during the digging process, machine excavation must stop immediately and hand digging must be done to confirm the presence or absence of an existing burial at the exposed depth.

11. When the excavation is complete the shoring system must be installed. Shoring systems must be installed by certified persons as per the manufacturer's instructions and as per the certified training. Note: Shoring systems are not required for entry into an all sided concrete vault.
12. No-one must enter a grave until a shoring system has been fixed in place. All persons entering a grave must wear a hard hat.

13. Materials and equipment required for the exhumation include but are not limited to:
 - Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs)
 - Disposable suits;
 - Rubber Boots;
 - Gloves (latex, rubber & leather)
 - Knee pads;
 - Soap and Disinfectant;
 - “Dermofilm”; and
 - Hard hats.
 - New Coffin or Ossuary Box(es)
 - Bags for handling “wet” waste
 - Spade and hand digging tools
 - Sieve, scoop
 - Buckets (with rope attached)
 - Canopy (for use in all weather conditions)
 - Personnel Emergency Lifting Device
14. Protective gear should be put on in the following order:
 - i) Disposable suit
 - ii) Knee pads
 - iii) Rubber Boots
 - iv) Hard hat
 - v) “Dermofilm”
 - vi) Latex gloves
 - vii) Rubber gloves
15. Prior to entering a grave or vault, an accredited gas detection system must be used by a certified person to evaluate the presence of at least the following gases in the grave or vault: Oxygen, Nitrogen, Carbon Dioxide and Methane. The guidelines for assessing the safe levels of these gases in a grave or vault before allowing a person to entry are noted in *AS/NZS 2865 -2005: Safe Working in a Confined Spaces*. These guidelines must be adhered to.
16. The staff member/contractor/funeral director or employee of entering the grave must be fitted to the Personnel Emergency Lifting Device as per the Standard.
17. Enter the grave using the shoring or a ladder and commence removal of excess earth with the spade. Load a bucket and haul it out with a rope and deposit it in a wheelbarrow or the bucket of the front end loader.

NOTE: The Funeral Director involved in the exhumation must be present before any remains removal from the Grave Site.

18. Where possible, the name plates of coffins of existing burials at the site must be located, cleaned and attached to the exhumation paperwork. This must also be noted on the Exhumation Form (*Attachment A*)
19. The next steps will depend on the state of the remains being exhumed.

OPTION 1:

If decomposition is completed and skeletal remains can only be found.

Note: This is likely to be the case for remains buried for over 20 years.

- Remove the skeletal remains into a clean bucket, lift out of the grave and place into an ossuary box or a new coffin (to be supplied by the Funeral Director).
- When wooden or bone material is revealed, use hand tools to further expose the remains.
- Remove any remaining coffin fragments in the same manner.
- Recover the skeletal remains by working from one end to maintain a systematic approach to the collection of all remains.
- Excavation will normally only be required in the area occupied/previously occupied by the coffin.
- Sift all soil removed from in and around the coffin to ensure all skeletal material is recovered.
- Any metal components e.g. handles should also be recovered.

CAUTION!

Be aware that the grave may contain fragments of metal, glass and ceramics which can tear your gloves and cause injury. Loosen the soil with the hand tools before using your hands to separate items rather than dig undisturbed soil with your hands. If your hands are injured, remove the gloves and apply disinfectant. Seek First Aid and/or medical assistance.

OPTION 2:

Where decomposition is incomplete and the coffin is substantially intact.

- Attempt to remove the coffin and the remains together. (2 people may be required in the grave.)
- Remove earth from around the coffin to enable the rope/tapes/wires to be passed around and underneath it. Note that a coffin is unlikely to lift out within a space of its own size. It will be necessary to excavate a hole larger than the coffin on all sides to enable the coffin to be successfully lifted out relatively intact.
- Attach the coffin by chains to the excavator and lift out.

OPTION 3:

Where decomposition is incomplete and the coffin has fallen apart or disintegrated

- Attempt to pass a body bag underneath and around the remains (including the coffin remnants).
- When the remains are intact, obtain assistance to slowly and carefully lift out the bag or attach it to the excavator or backhoe.

CAUTION!

- **Deodorising/disinfectant compound may be necessary.**
- **Face masks with charcoal filters may also be necessary.**
- **Always ensure your gloves are intact and human remains do not come in contact with your skin.**

20. If not carrying out the exhumation in the grave, the Funeral Director is to take charge of the remains once they are on the surface.
21. Do a final check of the grave to ensure all remains and coffin material has been removed.
22. Remove the shoring equipment.
23. Backfill the grave as per standard procedure.
24. Remove disposable equipment (e.g. gloves, suits) and place them in a wet waste" disposal bag for removal for appropriate disposal.
25. Other equipment (e.g. shovels, picks, hand tools, hard hats, face masks, boots, & tools) must be washed and disinfected.

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26. Persons carrying out the exhumation must clean up with disinfectant and/or shower and change clothes.

If you have been in close contact with the remains and the surrounding ground and material, you must dispose of all your safety clothing, have shower and put on clean clothing.

27. Return all materials/equipment to the vehicle or workshop.
28. Complete the remaining sections of the Exhumation Form (*Attachment A*) and forward the completed form to the relevant Supervisor.
29. Exhumation Forms are permanent records that must be attached to the relevant burial file and retained on Council's cemetery records.

ATTACHMENT ONE



EXHUMATION FORM

NAME OF DECEASED:

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Date of Exhumation **Time of Exhumation.....**

ORIGINAL BURIAL DETAILS

Date of Burial Burial Reg. No.

Sex Age Licence No.....

Section Path Grave No. Depth

Name of Grantee of Grave

Address of Licensee.....

.....Phone:.....

Old Licence Presented Yes/No

Original Funeral Director

Original Coffin Details

Original Burial Depth Details.....

Other Relevant Information.....

ATTACHMENT TWO



**GRAVE ENTRY PERMIT AS/NZS 2865: 2001
CONFINED SPACE WRITTEN AUTHORITY FORM**

Date	Location: Section	Path	Site
Description of work: Lift & Deepen [] Exhumation [] Re-use []			
Hazards: Ground Collapse [] Build up of Gas [] Ground Water [] Falling Objects (monuments) [] Other []			

Control Measures

Isolation			Hot Work		
Water/gas/steam/chemical	yes	no	Area clear of all combustibles including atmosphere	yes	no
Mechanical /Electrical	yes	no	Type of appropriate fire extinguisher available	yes	no
Auto Fire Extinguisher System	yes	no	Suitable access and exit	yes	no
Hydraulic /Electric/Wastes	yes	no	Hot work is permitted	yes	no
Sludge/deposits/wastes	yes	no			
Locks or tags fixed to isolation points	yes	no	Personal Protective Equipment The following PPE <i>SHALL</i> be worn		
			Hard Hat	yes	no
Other Precautions			Respiratory Protection	yes	no
Warning signs / barricades	yes	no	Harness/lifeline	yes	no
Smoking forbidden	yes	no	Hand Protection	yes	no
All persons trained	yes	no	Safety boots Rubber boots	yes	no
Ventilation required	yes	no	Eye protection	yes	no
Water pump in place	yes	no	Hearing Protection	yes	no
			Disposable overalls	yes	no
Emergency response procedures / equipment			Communication Equipment Mobile phone / Two Way radio	yes	no
Rescue tripod and rescue line	yes	no	Other	yes	no
Safety harness worn	yes	no			
Procedures posted	yes	no			
First aid Kit	yes	no			
Trench Shoring installed	yes	no			
Atmosphere Test results of the atmosphere in the confined space			Stand by personnel		
Oxygen (O2)		%	Name		
Flammable / Explosive Gases (CH4)		%	Name		
Carbon Monoxide (CO)		PPM	Name		
Hydrogen Sulphide (H2S)		PPM	Name		
Without respiratory protection	yes	no	Name		
With respiratory device	yes	no			
With supplied air breathing apparatus	yes	no			

ATTACHMENT TWO



**GRAVE ENTRY PERMIT AS/NZS 2865: 2001
CONFINED SPACE WRITTEN AUTHORITY FORM**

Authority to Enter

The control measures and precautions appropriate for the safe entry and execution of the work in the confined space have been implemented and the persons requires to work in the confined space have been advised and understand the requirements of this written authority

Signed (Person in control)

Date.....Timeam/pm

Written authority valid until

DateTime.....am/pm

Persons required to enter confined space

ENTRY			EXIT		
Name	Date	Time	Name	Date	Time

Withdrawal of written authority

All persons and equipment are accounted foryes / no

Equipment checked and restored correctlyyes / no

Signed(person in control)

Date.....Timeam/pm

Remarks /comments about the work

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