

The Modern Embalmer

“Embalming at the Speed of Enlightenment”

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**FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE
FUNERAL INDUSTRY:
TOXIC THOUGHTS VERSUS TOXIC DEEDS.**

**By James H. Bedino, Chemist/Director of Research
The Champion Company**

My current article is a response to my perceived “throwing of a gauntlet” by Steven Palmer that was published in the November 2008 edition of Funeral Home and Cemetery News (formerly YB News). In fairness and openness, this author’s commentary is herewith republished, with permission of Nomis Publications, unchanged, unaltered, in its entirety and in its original presentational format. To understand the discussion and points it is necessary to first read my [Justifying Embalming, and Apologizing for Formaldehyde](#) article that is accessible on this website, [TheModernEmbalmer.com](#). Following now is Steven Palmer’s Toxic Thoughts article. Immediately after which I delineate my response, which let us hope, will not be too toxic.

The Dose Makes The Poison.

— Paracelsus, apocryphal



Observations

By Steven Palmer

Toxic Thoughts

"Men are not only bad from good motives, but also often good from bad motives"
—G. K. Chesterton

The gauntlet has been thrown.

In this case, instead of the armored knight's glove, this was one is a latex free embalming glove; Thrown down by a representative of an embalming/funeral service company.

James H. Bedino, Chemist/Director of Research for the **Champion Company** has authored a challenge to a duel within funeral service. His article in the *Champion Expanding Encyclopedia* is entitled "Justifying Embalming and Apologizing for Formaldehyde: The Never Ending Disinfection, Preservation, Restoration Debate in the Funeral Industry."

Bedino leads us through, what he believes, are the myths of most current day embalming. He tells us that "In the embalming trade, even the most comprehensive and modern textbooks dwell on and allude to these archaic justifications and rationalizations for Stone Age formaldehyde embalming." He claims that the textbooks out today are very outdated. "Would you want your surgeon to rely on a 50-year old textbook on surgical procedures of the heart?"

He later invokes, "Unfortunately, it seems the funeral industry is in the dustbin, can't see the way out, and spends all it's time justifying why the dustbin is really not so bad anyhow."

"The disinfection concept is the rationale behind the CDC stance that embalming in no way serves any public safety or health function." Bedino goes on to state that "millions of unembalmed corpses worldwide, in any given year, are safely disposed of by numerous means, without impact on public health or safety and generate no documented outbreaks of disease that endanger society, the mourners, or anyone else."

He asks, "How do you justify archaic formaldathinking 100 year old obsolete embalming procedures, turn of the 19th century undertaking, and still commune with the modern world?"

He answers it by, "It's a pretend game, but you usually get your cake and eat it too—maybe."

So where are we going with this attack on traditional preservation of those we have taken into our care?

Bedino asks, "Is there any justifiable or advantageous results of embalming?" His follow up: "The answer is absolutely yes—you just have to ask the right question in the right way."

In embalming's traditional manner that "generates a carcinogenic and noxious exposure hazard to the embalmer," it also is "an environmental and disposal hazard to society."

"Skip to the chase," Bedino continues, "embalm'em rock hard, create a stone statue that's easy to move around, probably won't go bad and is easy to paint up with greasepaint. Sanitation and safety is trivial, so forget about it and nature lifelike appearance by heavy pancake makeup (tart in'em up?) and dim lighting will be good enough. Not too many advocate restoration as an end-all-or-be-all, but the arguments are essentially the same—make'em look presentable and everything else will probably work out, besides you can always slam the lid shut if worse comes to worse."

"In spite of what is constantly touted and taught in the funeral industry, embalming is not justified by anything."

The embalming fluid employee begins to show his true hand, by promoting gluteraldehydes, Champion's big Millennium investment, "all desirable results of the embalming process can be reasonably achieved."

The debate will not be viewed by most as formaldehyde vs. gluteraldehyde but embalming/any preservation vs. absolutely no preservation. The public will not understand that this is a company peddling alternative fluids. If Champion is under the false impression that this article will be contained "within the family" they are mistaken; the internet has already taken it to places we wish it had not. This argument has not advanced funeral service into a new "millennium" but has given false fodder to the funeral service consumer groups and the like.

A major supplier of funeral service supply products has kicked the can down the road in the opposite direction that will serve their interests and ours.

"Accuse: to affirm another's guilt or unworth; most commonly as a justification of ourselves for having wronged him."

—Ambrose Bierce

Steven Palmer entered funeral service in 1971. He is an honors graduate of the New England Institute of Applied Arts & Sciences. Licensed on both coasts, he owns the Westcott Funeral Homes of Cottonwood and Camp Verde, AZ. Steve offers his observations on current funeral service issues. He may be reached by mail at PO Box 352, Cottonwood, AZ 86326, by phone at (928)634-9566, by fax at (928)634-5156, by e-mail at westcott@commspeed.net or through his website at www.westcottfuneralhome.com.

Well, how do you approach it all? You have read my article, long though it was, and now Steven Palmer's observations on it. First things first — the opinions, beliefs, caustic commentary, humor and anything else is solely mine and mine alone and not necessarily that of The Champion Company, or anyone else for that matter. There's nobody to blame but me, so get over it. With that aside, I feel the best way to address all perceived grievances is to read along with me, through this article, while we mine for the truth.

Toxic thoughts? What about toxic deeds? That after all is the real problem, not what level of decorum we effuse during the discussion or what facts we prefer not to bring up at all, due to the delicacy of the situation, or our fears that these things should not be talked of. What about everything we know that is flat out dangerous, wrong and ridiculous about formaldehyde embalming and refuse to do anything about? So who's the good guy and who's the bad guy? Am I good with bad motives, or bad with good motives? GKC would never have been my quote choice (way too much baggage with that one), but at any rate, the point is the facts on the ground and the science behind them support my contentions regarding toxic formaldehyde embalming. Latex, also, is no laughing matter. The misinformation, dangers of use and pandering concerning the "latex embalming glove" are distorted and convoluted to the point where logic usually leaves the room and you just buy the cheapest thing anyway. Besides, didn't your door-to-door peddler of funeral merchandise tell you it was no big deal anyway?

The industry as a whole is overloaded with archaic research reports that are a quarter-of-a-century to a half-of-a-century old. They are obsolete and outdated and of marginal value as they prove nothing and are ignored by modern science-based research as useless. It doesn't do any good to talk about an investigation into formaldehyde exposure that was done in the 70's or 80's, instead it just makes us feel good about what used to be and hope that we can use it as a theatrical foil against modern science that documents and condemns formaldehyde as toxic, hazardous and carcinogenic.

Until very recently, when Robert Mayer's excellent comprehensive textbook made its debut, the few or only textbooks that existed were archaic, obsolete, repetitive and simplistic, at best. Sorry, but that's the way it is and those old F&S textbooks, moldy as they are, aren't going away anytime soon. They are literally on every shelf in every funeral home in the country. Robert Mayer's textbook only came out in the early 1990's, that means the vast majority of those practicing in the industry and calling all the shots have all been brought up on the obsolete, outdated textbooks of the past — and it shows throughout the industry. And if that's not bad enough — Mayer's textbook is way under appreciated by many in the industry, with the complaints being that it's not simple enough and should be shorter, so it won't take so long to read, and maybe what we really need is a new version of one of those good old textbooks. This, to me, is an affront to Robert Mayer's expertise and dedication and nothing short of incredulous. Sure looks like a dustbin to me.

The CDC just publishes the facts and arrives at conclusions based on science. Their widely espoused assertions are documented and they are what they are. If this instills you with fear and loathing, there is nothing I can do about that. In the grand scheme of things, we usually define normalcy and appropriateness as what we do in our own little country (and yes, we do carry the biggest stick), rather than what the worldwide facts tell us. With a world population pushing seven billion, the number of unembalmed deaths, estimated worldwide, is a staggering 62-64 million and maybe more. Total deaths and embalmings (which are continually dropping) in the U.S., pale in comparison to these gargantuan statistics, and appear

insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Embalming is only practiced in the U.S. and a few other small hot spots in the world. Everywhere else it is unpracticed, unadopted and of no consequence. It is these brutal facts that the CDC uses to document and confirm their findings. It should come as no surprise, then, that the science and CDC findings are not what the funeral industry wishes to hear. And then comes the fear and loathing. I do know one thing, though — pretending the CDC didn't say it or there is some dark ominous motive behind it all, short-circuits any rational thinking or modernization that needs to desperately occur in the industry.

Yes, the industry and the chemical suppliers are playing a pretend game, saying the research is still “fuzzy” and it isn't over until they pry our hands off that high index cavity fluid bottle. By doing this, we all feel good for a little while longer (kind of like a stay of execution) but sooner or later the hammer drops and we don't even know what hit us. It happened in Europe, you think it won't happen here? Check with the asbestos manufacturers and see how they are doing. In fact, one of the special counsels at the NFDA convention in Orlando said the current situation more-or-less mirrors the regulatory climate that asbestos faced and the clamp down that occurred effectively eliminated its usage and shut down their manufacturing/mining as a result. Does anyone really lament the elimination of this toxic and deadly material? And, it was perceived as a very effective, valuable and a much needed product — at least it kept your house warm at night. Somehow, I don't see toxic, cancer-causing formaldehyde embalming fluid gaining any of that respect. Society's answer to formaldehyde embalming is loud and clear — get rid of it.

The author is then appalled that I think traditional old-style formaldehyde, rockhard, dehydration embalming is a bad thing and an exposure nightmare for the embalmer and a toxic disposal situation. All the science points to that and the industry, as a whole, has downplayed safety, sanitation, and cosmetic restoration as just tagalongs for the real reason we embalm — rockhard preservation — at all costs, so the concept of “protection” can be justified and marketed. And, of course, there is nothing on the face of the earth, other than formaldehyde, that works — so there. If formaldehyde is dangerous and nasty, well, that's just the way it is and we won't be doing anything about it, and that's that, so man the ramparts. When one of the special counsel for the NFDA gets up in a seminar and says he has gone into client funeral homes and has to tell them that they stink of formaldehyde, that tells me all I need to know.

Thankfully, not everybody is in this sinking boat — there are forward-thinking, progressive, and concerned funeral directors out there and they are the ones that are on board with Champion and our toxic reduction strategies. Which, of course, brings us to the old school attacks on Champion and that most dreaded and feared alternative — glutaraldehyde (Please, will somebody, somewhere, somehow spell it correctly — Please?). All the science, all the research, all the testing verifies and confirms glutaraldehyde as a superior alternative in overall toxicity, exposure parameters, controllability and overall enviro-impact. Toxicity and exposure can never be eliminated in any traditionalist embalming (glutaraldehyde or otherwise) but the replacement/elimination of formaldehyde with glutaraldehyde drastically reduces these parameters and still delivers an acceptable embalming. Thousands of Champion users worldwide have proven the validity of reduced exposure glutaraldehyde embalming methodologies and the effectiveness of our chemicals. They will be the ones that will be able to make the leap into the future and we intend to take them there. The industry, as a whole, however, due to lack of caring, disregard for safety and careless satisfaction with archaic products and methodologies, cost driven decisions, and general laziness, has not taken even this valuable small step. The funeral industry hasn't budged off its rotundity in over a hundred years and maybe it never

will. I, for one, don't plan to wait around and see. The ultimate goal is to develop nontoxic, nonhazardous embalming chemicals for safe industry use in the future. Champion will deliver on that goal, I can guarantee you that. We delivered on the intermediate goal of drastic toxic/exposure reduction and formaldehyde elimination, through our Millennium New Era line, and we will succeed again.

Finally, we arrive at the true source of all the fear and loathing. Embalming like we always have with dangerous, toxic formaldehyde and disregard for ourselves, others and the environment might be seen for what it is and end up being abandoned or unwanted by society, in general. The fear then, is, if there is no formaldehyde preserved corpse present, then everything else we do is meaningless and we will just vanish into thin air. If that's all there is to it, then you might be right. The corollary fear is — if we don't keep everything a secret and hide it from society and the consumer, we are all doomed. Consequently, fear the internet and the free transmission of knowledge and opinions to interested, educated and informed society, and please just keep it all a secret. So, I guess, we fear the very people that we purport to serve — the funeral consumer. The very publication Steven Palmer's article appeared in, literally lays itself bare on the worldwide web on a monthly basis and a lot of what is written there could easily be interpreted as arcane mortuary insider-talk and morbidly curious to industry outsiders and the general public. The can got kicked down the alley a long time ago, it wasn't by me, and it's not rolling back, I think it's the ominous rattling noises that are now reverberating that the industry fears most.

Our primary concern then, as an industry, should be to deliver to the consumer that which they demand and desire, for they will procure it one way or another and from someone else. Didn't we learn anything from the cremation movement? Oh, yeah, I remember now, it was an affront to traditional funeral values, a passing fad and would never be adopted in the U.S. and best left unspoken about. Guess we didn't see that one coming. We need to reinvent what embalming will be in the future, if not the future will reinvent it, or deinvent it, on its own and there may not even be a reason to involve us. Following the old, tired formaldehyde embalming ways will just lead to oblivion and a slow excruciating extinction of the industry. If we do not offer safer and more reasonable alternatives to our archaic practices, products and procedures, the consumer and society will substitute their own alternatives and leave the funeral industry in the dust. That is a scenario that does not need to occur. Instead, all we have to do is embrace the future and endless possibilities will appear that we never imagined. Champion will be there and we invite you to come along.

So, there you have it. I stand accused, or do I? Who is the accused? Who is the accuser? *La accusé(d), la accusé(e)*, that is the conundrum. Well, as they say — the Devil's in the Dictionary. I think, though, that doesn't really matter, for what is most important is our acknowledgement of the facts and deciding what we are going to do about them, so as to best insure our future existence. I, for one, know exactly what that is — just do the right thing. To Steven Palmer — thanks for the joust.