**How Physicians Can Support Arizona Families to Care for Their Own Dead**

Arizona families have the legal right to custody and control of their own dead. Whether the death was anticipated or unanticipated, once time and cause of death are established, the family may choose to care for and transport the body, file the death certificate, arrange for burial, and conduct any other aspect of after-death care without the assistance of a funeral director, or using one for some but not all of these tasks.

**Legal Authority of Families**

In Arizona, the legislative authority for families to act as unpaid funeral services practitioners is found in **Arizona Statute § 36-326** where the law declares that a body disposition permit may be issued to “a funeral director or other responsible person.” The responsible person is described additionally as the “Authoring agent” in ARS 36-831, starting with the spouse or designated agent.

**Ways You Are Empowered to Assist Families**   
As the person responsible for establishing cause of death, physicians are often the primary legal authority in contact with the family. How you approach their choices will determine the direction taken. Here are three ways you can positively influence the outcome:

1. The prevailing practice in hospitals and hospices when a death has occurred, or in anticipation of a death, is to ask families, “*What funeral home do you want us to call?”* The question implies that the family is required to purchase the services of a funeral director or mortuary when this is not, in fact, the case. Instead encourage your staff to ask families, “*What plans can we assist you in making?”*
2. Let families interested in handling their own paperwork know they may do so once the medical portion (pronouncement and cause of death by medical authorities) and the demographic portion (by the next-of-kin acting as their own funeral director) are completed.
3. One of the biggest stumbling blocks for families handling their own paperwork is finding physicians to get the medical portion of the death certificate completed, especially in circumstances when the deceased died in an unfamiliar place. Physicians can make a real difference to home funeral families by tending to the cause of death signature on the death certificate as quickly as possible.

**Additional Information**   
Arizona Funeral Resources & Education www.AZfuneral.org

National End-of-Life Doula Alliance www.nedalliance.org

National Home Funeral Alliance www.homefuneralalliance.org

Funeral Consumers Alliance www.funerals.org