

Evaluating the current guidelines regarding the handling and ritual washing (Ghusl) of the Muslim Deceased Patient with COVID-19

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Bismillâh Al Rahman Al Raheem

All Praise is for Allah Lord of the Worlds. And the Salat and Salaam of Allah be upon the Mercy to the Worlds.

Introduction

After consultation with Professor Sheikh Awadallah, Rector of The Open School of Arabic and Islamic Studies,¹ we endeavoured to collate current guidelines regarding the concerns around the Ghusl of Muslims who were infected with COVID-19.

The research was compiled by Dr Sarfraz Shahid, GP in Leicester, working with local Doctors and MBCOL. We would like to present it to the reader for their thoughts reflections and opinions

We ask Allah for His Help and Guidance to do the best for the Ummah.

Current response of Muslim Burial Organisations

The Muslim Council of Britain alongside the National Burial Council (Muslim) have stated that the standard Islamic Washing (Ghusl) and Shrouding (Kafn) is safe to perform whilst using appropriate Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)^{2 3}

Despite the guidelines Muslim organisations in the UK have adopted mixed approaches to the care of the deceased. As of 24th March 2020 the following Cities in the UK have performed Ghusl for the Deceased Muslim infected with COVID-19:

1. Manchester - North Manchester General Hospital - the Muslim Chaplains are trained in PPE and they perform the Ghusl.⁴

2. London - Gardens of Peace.⁵

¹ <http://theopenschool.org/about/>

² <https://mcb.org.uk/community/burialfags/>

³ <http://nbc.org.uk/>

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<https://www.pat.nhs.uk/news/North-Manchester-General-Hospital-advice-to-public-following-sad-death-of-a-patient-with-COVID-19-Coronavirus-at-Infectious-Diseases-Unit.htm>

⁵ <https://gardens-of-peace.org.uk/>

3. London - Muhammad Tariq - Muslim Funeral Services.⁶

The following organisations have announced that they will not be performing Ghushl:

1. Gloucestershire Muslim Burial Services
2. Federation of Mosques Sheffield.

Fear of infection arising from the deceased who is infected with COVID-19

Despite the guidance from the MCB and NBC which has been based on official guidelines, there is considerable ongoing fear that the process is too hazardous to those washing or transporting the body. This has been apparently based upon the opinion of individual Medical Consultants.

This is however contrary to the current available guidelines and established mainstream understanding.

The guidelines are reviewed here:

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control issued guidelines on the safe handling of bodies or persons dying from COVID 19 clearly state:

- A. There is no evidence of infection transmission from the deceased.
- B. During 'standard handling' (such as moving/transporting) the risk of transmission is low.
- C. Any aerosol generating procedure (which may include opening the bag) carries a higher risk and will require use of appropriate PPE.⁷

The Royal College of Pathologists reiterate this advice.⁸

The New South Wales advice to funeral directors.(March 2020) also reiterate the same.⁹

⁶ <http://www.mfs.org.uk/>

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<https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/COVID-19-safe-handling-of-bodies-or-persons-dying-from-COVID19.pdf>

⁸

<https://www.rcpath.org/uploads/assets/0b7d77fa-b385-4c60-b47dde930477494b/G200-TBP-s-Guidance-for-care-of-deceased-during-COVID-19-pandemic.pdf>

⁹ <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/covid-19-funeral-directors.aspx>

The Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (US) have issued specific guidance for the handling of patients after death, although for it is aimed for the collection of samples, it states “The guidance can be utilized by medical examiners, coroners, pathologists, other workers involved in the postmortem care of deceased PUI, and local and state health departments.”

It also re-iterates that it is safe to handle the deceased using appropriate protective equipment.¹⁰

Public Health England issued COVID-19 Guidance for infection prevention and control in healthcare settings which clearly stipulates that despite the risk of infectious transmission via contact **“the risk is usually lower than for living patients”**

The guidance further clarifies:

“Where the deceased was known or suspected to have been infected with COVID-19, there is no requirement for a body bag, and viewing, hygienic preparations, post-mortem and embalming are all permitted”¹¹

Fear that the Ghush Facilities will not be suitable.

The NBC guidance details appropriate cleaning methods for the ghush area. In addition, the CDC suggests in higher risk environments the risk can be further reduced by use of a portable HEPA air filtration circulator.

Opening the Body Bag will release infective gases

Public Health England advised that a body bag is not required, however some mortuaries did suggest that they would place the deceased in one.

The CDC guidelines are further reassuring that if a procedure does not induce coughing or sneezing in an infected patient a 'negative pressure room' is not required. But despite that, if the deceased has been placed in a body bag I would advise to release the pressure slowly. (This can be done by inserting a 50-100ml syringe with a needle to aspirate the air in the bag before it is unzipped).

Conclusion

The current available guidelines from the UK, US, Australia and Europe state it is safe to handle the deceased patient who was infected with COVID-19 taking into consideration appropriate PPE. This could be further augmented by the use of a HEPA air filtration circulator.

¹⁰ <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/hcp/guidance-postmortem-specimens.html>

¹¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874316/Infection_prevention_and_control_guidance_for_pandemic_coronavirus.pdf

Suggestions

It would be valuable for Mosque Committees, Funeral/Burial Organisations, families, Health Professionals and individuals to read, discuss and reflect on what has been presented. I would be grateful to receive feedback and advice.

We ask Allah The Most High and Al Lateef, to forgive us all our sins, and honour our deceased, and help all people of all religions and backgrounds, with His Mercy, in this time.

Ameen

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