

Plan for freeze-dry body disposal

Dead bodies could soon be freeze-dried and ground into a fine powder before being disposed of.

Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council is to discuss using the technique, called promession, in a bid to reduce harmful mercury emissions caused by cremations.

The new process was developed in Sweden and is soon to be tested there.

If successful, the council may use the process in a bid to meet government targets on harmful emissions. The powder could then be used as a compost.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) has advised all cremation authorities and companies in the UK they have until the end of 2005 to consider their options for a 50% reduction in the emissions of mercury by 2012.

Promession involves freezing the body and coffin to -18C then dipping it in liquid nitrogen at -196C.

We are looking at other options to cremation
Mary Slinn, Crewe and Nantwich Borough Council

Both body and coffin become so brittle that by the time they are placed on a vibrating pad, they disintegrate into a powder. A metal separator then picks out metals such as artificial hips and mercury dental fillings to be put in a biodegradable coffin.

The powder is put into a small box made of potato or corn starch and placed in a shallow grave, where it will disintegrate within six to 12 months.

Relatives would then be encouraged to plant a tree on the grave which would feed off the compost formed from the body.

The technique is to be widely used for the first time in Sweden in 2007.

Mary Slinn, cemetery and crematoria manager at the council, said if promession proved successful in Sweden and councillors accept her recommendation, the technique could be used in the borough by 2010.

"We are looking at other options to cremation and one of the things I have suggested is looking at this alternative and environmentally-friendly way of disposing of bodies," she said.

Brain damage

"The first stage is for a group to be set up, I have already heard a paper given by the woman who created it. It was a very, very good paper but there are some questions we would need to ask."

She said the Swedish version was expected to cost £1m to install, the same as a Swedish crematorium.

But she said British crematoria installations were less expensive so hoped the same would be true for promessions.

Mercury is a highly toxic heavy metal that has been linked to damage to the brain and nervous system.

It is estimated that crematoria release up to 16% of the UK's total mercury emissions.

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