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Reg Horne of Justicia Investigations



Musa Dumisa of Celani Funeral Services

UNSCRUPULOUS UNDERTAKERS: MAKING A KILLING

Coffin crooks

...cashing in on the dead



Beatie Johnston-Webber, of Doves Funeral Directors

DEATH, frightening as it may be, is a booming business in South Africa that is making a lot of people happy. And rich. More so because of the high rate of HIV/Aids-related deaths happening almost every day. But the burgeoning funeral undertaking industry has also attracted unscrupulous fly-by-night operators who are making a killing amid the grief and sorrow.

And African people, who spend more on burials than many whites and Indians who prefer the cheaper option of cremation, are more often the victims of these operators. Many of these grieving families have fallen prey to some unscrupulous funeral directors who sell used coffins after plundering graves to retrieve them or, in the case of a cremation, swap an expensive coffin for a cheaper one just before it goes into the furnace.

Such is the fear among families of dead relatives that some have resorted to pouring cement into graves as the ultimate - but also illegal - protection from thieves.

Investigations by the *Daily News* and a private investigation firm have also shown that some of these fly-by-night funeral parlours operate almost entirely with coffins and vehicles stolen from their bigger competitors.

Some operators resort to crime because they want to enter the lucrative business, but do not have the start-up capital for infrastructure and equipment. Others



which are cheaper, because there are no cemetery fees involved and people tend to buy cheaper coffins for cremations rather than burials, which are more expensive because of grave fees," she said.

Doves is a member of the National Funeral Directors' Association of Southern Africa (NFDASA) which has a strict code of conduct by which all members are bound. The association is dominated mainly by white undertakers.

Its chairman, Mr Fanus Kloppers, said the association sought to ensure the public was protected from unprofessional service and misconduct. Any member of the public could complain to the association about a parlour.

Dumisa is an executive member of the South African Funeral Practitioners' Association (Safpa), which has an exclusive African membership drawn from most parts of the country.

Despite the association's strict professional code of conduct, there have been shocking allegations that some undertakers resort even to murder to satisfy their needs.

Investigations have revealed that some parlours allegedly hire hitmen to kill people for the sole purpose of business. Others use shocking cost-cutting methods.

A *Daily News* investigation into one such funeral parlour in Umlazi found that on some nights the electricity was switched off to cut down on the bill.

Residents have complained of a "bad smell" coming from the parlour where the

The growth of the undertaking industry has attracted fly-by-night operators whose methods have given the professional parlours a bad name. But, as Elijah Mhlanga reports, it is also some of the established parlours that employ distasteful and even illegal methods.

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Some operators resort to crime because they want to enter the lucrative business but do not have the start-up capital for infrastructure and equipment. Others continue with their illegal activities long after they have been in the industry.

Startling evidence of these and other shady activities within some of Durban's best known funeral parlours are contained in video recordings taken by Mr Reg Horne of Justicia Investigations, a private investigation firm based in Pinetown.

Horne was called in to investigate a spate of suspected thefts at one of Durban's biggest and most successful funeral parlours by competitors also based in central Durban. Although the names of the two funeral parlours are known to the *Daily News*, they cannot be revealed at this stage because the operators have not yet been charged.

The problem is that the big, legitimate operators are trying to flush out their crooked employees who have been bought off by the smaller undertakers.

"If we reveal names it will jeopardise their business," said Horne, who has conducted an extensive investigation leading to the recovery of equipment valued at thousands of rands.

Although Horne's probe was conducted on a small scale, he believed the problem to be much bigger.

The video footage, captured by a hidden camera, contains clear and incriminating footage of employees stealing coffin handles and also swopping expensive oak and mahogany coffins worth about R6 000 for those made from cheap wood.

It shows dramatic footage at a crematorium of bodies being hauled out of expensive coffins and dumped into cheaper ones. In most of the cases, limbs are left dangling out of ill-fitting, poorly-made coffins which, oblivious to the mourners, are then shoved into the furnace.

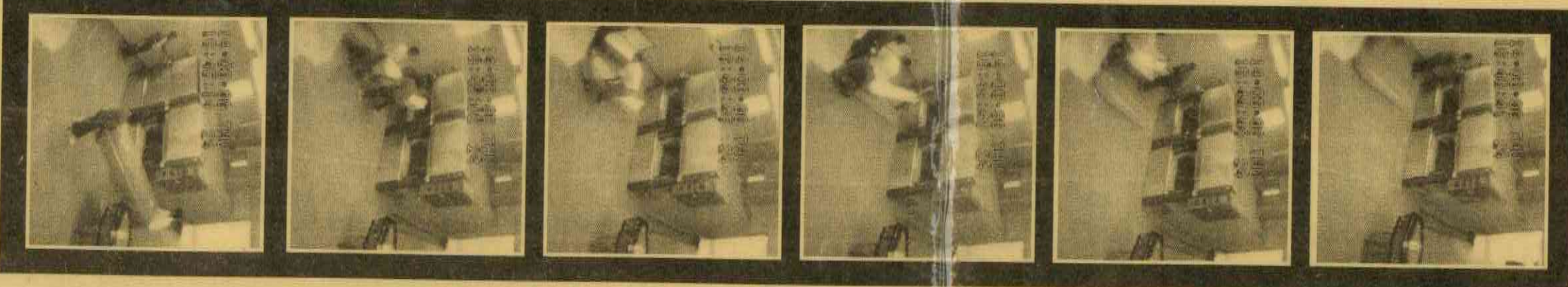
The expensive coffins are then sold for as little as R600 to rival parlours.

Unsuspecting, grieving customers are also taken for a ride in the case of burials. The average cost of a burial depends on the price of the coffin chosen and the cemetery fees. In total, a burial service within the Durban metro area can cost about R6 000, which includes the cemetery fees of R1 810, according to the secretary of Doves Funeral Directors in Durban, Mrs Beattie Johnston-Webber.

She said HIV/Aids had contributed immensely to the deaths of people, especially in KwaZulu-Natal.

But Mr Musa Dumnisa, of Umlazi, the managing director of Celani Funeral Services, one of the biggest African-owned undertakers with six branches in KwaZulu-Natal, said the cost of a funeral would vary because discounts were given to people belonging to burial clubs and schemes offered by undertakers.

"For instance, the public might be paying R1 700 for a funeral service, but club members will pay only R950 for the same funeral service. I will say the bulk of our services are from R850 to R3 500."



Video footage shows an expensive coffin being replaced by a cheap one before a cremation

The fees generally cover all expenses incurred in carrying out a funeral service, from the time an undertaker removes the body from the place of death to the actual burial or cremation.

After being collected, the body undergoes a pre-cooling procedure before being taken to a mortuary. Funeral arrangements would then be made, Dumnisa said.

The funeral arrangements include obtaining a death certificate from the doctor concerned and the registration of death with the home affairs department.

Johnston-Webber said that whites generally tended to spend less money on funerals compared to "our African people who traditionally spend more time and money on a loved one's funeral".

"Whites tend to choose cremations,

Musa Dumnisa of Celani Funeral Services

which are cheaper, because there are no cemetery fees involved and people tend to buy cheaper coffins for cremations rather than burials, which are more expensive because of grave fees," she said.

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Residents have complained of a "bad smell" coming from the parlour where the bodies were left unrefrigerated.

"It is unethical for them to do this. And how can they place the parlour here? When people are shopping they see bodies being taken in."

"When we take our people to other funeral directors in town they say we are racist because we do not want to support township business, yet it is they whose hygiene standards are appalling," said one customer, a justice department official.

When he changed undertakers, he was charged R850 by the first undertaker for storage of the body of his relative for two days. "He accused me of supporting Indians in town and not African people in the township, but that is not the issue, the issue is whether the undertaker provides a good service," he said.

Johnston-Webber said: "The funeral business is a very specialised industry which needs total commitment, professional service, dignity and respect, as well as a lot of empathy."

She said that over the last few years a number of "fly-by-night parlours" had sprung up and closed just as quickly because they believed that they could make quick and easy money. This had tarnished the image of the industry and had created the perception that the funeral business was a rip off.

Dumnisa's funeral parlour in Umlazi has been burned down three times because, he said, people believed he was involved in killing people for the extra business.

It was the deregulation of the industry which brought about the fly-by-night or "spaza operators" who preyed on desperate people, said Dumnisa.

"It is not only the theft of coffins they are involved in, but also theft of equipment. These items are expensive and most banks are not keen to finance them, so people steal them," he claimed.

Johnston-Webber agreed that the theft of coffins from parlours was indeed rife. "However, we can say with pride that in our company the procedures and checking systems we have make it almost impossible for this to happen," she said.

Horne said that as part of their investigations, the telephones of the suspected thieves were bugged and conversations recorded when "deals were made".

"We have footage of us recovering expensive coffins and other equipment stolen from the parlour that had hired us, and we also found that almost everything in the particular parlour where they were recovered were items that had been stolen from other parlours."

Both the major players in the industry and the public believe that only the proper regulation of the industry would halt its slide into immoral and unethical ground.

But, at the same time, any Government intervention should also address the imbalances which were historically skewed in favour of the white-run parlours, as a result of which many are now big and well-established businesses.

...Casting
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