

Wednesday, 1st April 2020

Guidance for Funerals and End of Life Care during Corona Virus Pandemic

This guidance has been prepared by the Sikh Council UK to help Gurdwaras, funeral directors and bereaved families during the global Coronavirus Disease (COVID 19) pandemic and is also based on the Governments guidance for the care of deceased with suspected or confirmed coronavirus (COVID – 19)

This guidance aims to explore current and worst-case scenarios for death management in the Sikh Faith. Our objectives are to:

1. Help end of life patients access pastoral/spiritual care when visitations are restricted
2. uphold the dignity and respect of the deceased
3. prevent the further loss of life or transmission of the potentially lethal disease to others
4. provide solace and closure for the bereaved
5. find practical solutions for applying the teachings and traditions of the **Sikh Faith**.

Inpatient/End of Life Care

To help stop the spread of coronavirus (COVID-19), most hospitals have stopped or significantly limited visits. You should check with your local hospital to find out what their advice is. Exceptions can be made on compassionate grounds, including vulnerable patients with dementia or learning disabilities, or patients receiving end-of-life care. If visitation is restricted, then loved ones may still make contact through phone/video-calls if the patient still has the means to do so.

If visiting is not allowed then the patient should be equipped with the means to access Gurbani digitally (via smartphones, portable mp3 players, etc.). If the patient is unable to independently access Gurbani the ward sister or charge nurse should be consulted so that Gurbani can be played near the patient audibly and respectfully. Spiritual/pastoral care can still be provided by chaplains or religious workers, i.e. granthis via phone communication.

While visitation is still allowed, and the patient has mental capacity, it is always a good idea to talk about the end of life care/post-death care with the patient.

For Amritdharis, their *Kakaars* need to be kept on their person even during hospitalisation and end-of-life. It is important to let staff members know of this requirement, especially when visitation is restricted. If the patient has special dietary needs as part of their *rehat* for example eating only from *Amritdharis* or *Sarbloh Bibek* this should be discussed with hospital staff and arrangements can be made for loved ones to drop-off meals.

Stage 2: Sehaj Paath

After a Sikh individual passes away, it is traditional to begin a Sehaj Paath on the same or following day. In normal circumstances, this would usually happen at the home of the deceased, but it is not uncommon or incorrect for the *paath* to occur at the Gurdwara. **During this period, we strongly**

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suggest that all *Sehaj Paaths* should be commenced and continued at the Gurdwara Sahib only. This means that the *Saroop* of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Jee and Granthi Singhs should not be brought home as they would be in a normal circumstance. **This is for the safety of both the Granthi Singhs and the family.**

If the Gurdwara Sahib can provide or arrange a live-stream, then this would be most beneficial. If this is not possible, then we encourage the family of the deceased to simultaneously pray by listening or reading Paath/Kirtan/Katha and Simran at home. A limited amount of individuals can attend the Gurdwara Sahib from the immediate family of the deceased if they wish to for the *arambh* of the *Sehaj Paath* if they are well. They may also arrange a set time with the Gurdwara Committee, for a few members to listen to the paath for a limited time at the Gurdwara (observing social distancing). They should not do this if they are self-isolating and especially if they are symptomatic of corona virus i.e. have a cough or temperature.

Sikh Maryada states that the *sehaj paath* following the death of an individual should be completed in or around ten days. Sometimes, it is not possible to arrange a funeral in this period, so it is possible to hold the *bhog* of the paath on an earlier or later date to the funeral. Traditionally, funerals would happen on the days following the death and the Paath would carry on in the ten days.

Additionally, during this period, Gurdwaras should request the family to provide information relating to the cause of death. In the event of a Covid 19 death, this will allow the Gurdwara to make suitable arrangements. If the deceased was diagnosed with corona virus, this should be recorded. Once this information is collated, it will help us understand the impact of the disease in our community.

Avsos

In Punjabi culture, it is common for non-immediate family and friends to visit the home of the deceased to express their grief. **During this period, there should be no such activity. Expressions of grief (avsos) should be limited to on-the-phone or postponed.**

Ishnaan and Preparing the Body

Official Government guidelines discourage the washing (ishnaan) of a COVID-19 patient that has deceased after suffering from COVID 19 by non-professionals, i.e. family members. Given the very significant risk for vulnerable and extremely vulnerable people who come into contact with the virus, it is strongly advised that they have no contact with the body this includes the elderly (over 65) and otherwise unwell.

There are many Sikh Funeral Directors that may be able to suitably and appropriately prepare the body in the light of Sikh Traditions which may mean that family members do not need to attend. However, it may be possible to arrange with funeral directors to provide appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) for a small number of relatives wishing to participate in this.

Funeral and Bhog of Sehaj Paath

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Families should limit visitation to immediate family only. If the family is self-isolating, then they should avoid allowing any other visitors. It is essential to maintain a safe distance in this time of at least three steps or 2 metres between individuals. The body should not be unnecessarily touched.

Although some families feel strongly about this, the body of the deceased should not be taken to the Gurdwara. As an alternative, the body of the deceased can be driven past the Gurdwara. However, it should remain closed in the coffin and, it should not leave the hearse (funeral vehicle).

Only young and healthy Granthis should attend the funeral service at the crematorium. Elderly Granthis and those with underlying health problems should follow government advice and self-isolate. No Gurdwara should force Granthis against their wishes to attend the funeral service.

Please take note and adhere to the following government advice:

"It is recognised that household members of the deceased person may have already been exposed to the virus during the course of the preceding illness. However, steps should be taken to minimise further exposure, and these should be rigorously applied in cases where individuals who are not part of the household and those at risk of severe illness would otherwise come into contact with the virus."

Those organising a funeral should adhere to the following:

- *restrict the number of mourners who attend so that a safe distance of at least 2 metres (3 steps) can be maintained between individuals*
- *only the following should attend:*
 - a. *members of the person's household*
 - b. *close family members*
 - c. *if the deceased has neither household or family members in attendance, then it is possible for a modest number of friends to attend*
- *at no point should mourners mix closer than 2 metres apart from each other*
- *mourners should follow the advice on social distancing when travelling to and from the funeral gathering*
- *mourners should avoid any direct face-to-face or physical contact, for example, hugging each other unless they are part of the same household, that is, they have already been living in the same house as each other*
- *mourners in attendance, should follow the general advice on hand hygiene and preventing the spread of infection:*
 - *wash your hands more often than usual, for 20 seconds using soap and hot water, particularly after coughing, sneezing and blowing your nose, or after being in public areas where other people are doing so. Use hand sanitiser if that's all you have access to and wash your hands with soap and hot water as soon as you can*
 - *to reduce the spread of germs when you cough or sneeze, cover your mouth and nose with a tissue, or your sleeve (not your hands) if you don't have a tissue, and throw the tissue away immediately. Then wash your hands or use a hand sanitising gel*

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- *before and after each service, clean and disinfect the area in which the service has taken place, as well as frequently touched objects and surfaces using your regular cleaning products to reduce the risk of passing the infection on to other people*
- *mourners who are unwell with symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19), or are part of a household with possible coronavirus (COVID-19) infection, should not attend any gatherings*
- *in many situations the household members of the deceased person will be the next of kin; they may be having to self-isolate in line with household guidance. Where the funeral is scheduled to take place before the period of household isolation has been completed (14 days from the first case in that household), there should be no mixing between mourners who are self-isolating and those who are not mourners who are symptomatic should not attend in any circumstance"*

Note: In the Sikh Faith the concept of mourning and attending as a mourner is contrary to the principles of Gurmat. Attendees of a Sikh funeral service are addressed as Saadh Sangat. In the above, the term 'mourners' has been used generically to refer to attendees by the Government.

Stage 4: Bhog Sehaj Paath/ Antim Ardhaas

The Bhog of the Sehaj Paath and the Antim Ardhaas is allowed, at a Gurdwara Sahib, as per the Governments guidance. We strongly urge only immediate family to attend. The Antim Ardhas can be live streamed so that others that cannot attend are able to participate.

Each Gurdwara should impose an appropriate limit on attendees so that safe distancing (two metres) can be maintained between each sangat member.

We strongly urge a maximum of ten people or less attend any part of the funeral. This includes the crematorium and the Gurdwara Sahib.

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