



Flies

(Musca domestica Linnaeus)

By Dennis Daulton

It was a miserable hot humid summer day as I clearly recall. The year was 1963. I was 16 years old. It happened in a city of hills where the river runs through and the railroad tracks follow its course. My job at a funeral home, where my mother served as staff organist for over 40 years, began several months previously, and I was chomping at the bit to go on my first house call. I had already

mastered nursing home and hospital removals, or so I thought. Now, almost 50 years later, I realize how much I didn't know...still don't know, and never will know...because the funeral profession is indeed a journey.

It was late in the afternoon when the local police department called to report that a prominent retired pharmacist was found dead in his bed, and

his family had requested our services. We later learned that his wife had gone to Maine to visit their daughter for the July 4th holiday. Not feeling well, he decided to remain at home. Fortunately for her their bedroom door was locked when she returned four days later. Unfortunately for the policeman who climbed onto the porch roof and through the bedroom window to unlock the door, and for us, the pharmacist had been dead for several days — perhaps four.

“This is great,” I thought as I quickly changed into my gray/black striped funeral pants, spit-polished black shoes, crisp, clean, starched white shirt, gray/black necktie, and black suit jacket; all of which made one look like a funeral service professional. I had wanted to be a funeral director since the age of six, and now my opportunity to go on my first house call had finally arrived. I was so proud and excited, but tried not to show it.

I remained in the hearse while my supervisor and nearly lifelong friend, Don Dufault, entered the home. I recognized the policeman, Patrolman Bob Mayne, who was standing next to his cruiser as we arrived. He threw his almost finished cigarette to the ground (littering?), stomped on it, and walked towards the hearse in an appearance of exhaustion and despair.

“Daulton, what are you doing here?” he asked with a puzzled look.

“I work for the funeral home,” I proudly replied.

He paused, took off his sunglasses, leaned in close to the open hearse window and whispered, “Now listen carefully. If I were you I’d walk down to the bottom of the hill and hitchhike home from the Upper Common as I’ve seen you do many times.”

I was shocked. What was he talking about, I wondered? He then walked slowly back to his cruiser and drove off...down the hill.

Don came out of the house; I got out of the hearse, and already knowing never to slam a hearse door, I met him at the rear of the vehicle. He reached for the disaster kit and instructed me to follow him into the house with the folded house stretcher.

As we walked towards the home he suddenly turned and said, “You aren’t going to get sick on me, are you?”

“I hope not,” I replied with a forced smile.

What I didn’t realize was that this would be the “removal from Hell.” Later I appreciated Don’s concern. How would you like to be the senior director on probably the most difficult house call of your career and have as an assistant someone who looked like an overgrown ring bearer in striped pants? But I was all he had.

The home was well appointed, clean, and tidy. The oak woodwork, beautiful fireplace, and large open stairway leading to the second floor offered an air of elegance in this predominately blue collar community. This place would make a great funeral

home I thought.

“Look in there,” Don said as he cracked opened the door to the large stately master bedroom. If you’ve ever witnessed a snow storm, actually a blizzard, envision that but change the color of the snowflakes from white to black...very large “black snowflakes.” That’s what I saw. And that’s what I’ll forever remember. Don was informed by Officer Mayne that the medical examiner partially opened the door, announced “He’s dead,” and quickly departed. No need to use the stethoscope this time.

Two aerosol cans of a product now long taken off the market were emptied through the cracked doorway. About twenty minutes later the “storm” had subsided, except for a few flies still buzzing around. No masks, shoe covers, or protective attire were used in those days, however, we did have the disaster kit which contained gloves, the maggot and fly spray, and a heavy-duty disaster pouch. Dead and dying flies completely covered the floor and all the flat surfaces in the room. With every step we took we could hear the crunching sound of flies under the soles of our shoes. But this was no time to stand still. I had cut many lawns to buy my prized funeral shoes, and this would be the last time they would ever be worn again. I tried not to breathe, but that didn’t work very well. The horrible odor of the badly decomposed body, mixed with the chemical spray, was nearly overwhelming. Somehow we endured.

Maggots were all over the body, and were coming out of the nostrils like a purge. It was sickening. Steam appeared to be coming off this bloated and blackened body which was rapidly decomposing before our eyes. For most, this would have been their last removal. And this was my first. After removing the body from the home we folded the mattress and bedding and put everything into the hearse. We then removed the nameplates from the hearse windows and went directly to the city dump to dispose of the mattress and bedding before returning to the funeral home with the deceased. A professional house cleaning company was called by the family. What a shock they must have had. To this day I wonder if they used snow shovels to clean up the flies.

Permission was granted by our local cemetery to store the body in their in-ground tomb before it was taken to the crematory. Thinking back, this was the first “direct cremation” I was involved with. The hearse and the funeral home garage, where the body was transferred from the stretcher to a wood casket, smelled for weeks. There was no postmortem exam or the customary trip to the medical examiner’s office which is common today. The pharmacist probably just died in his sleep. But he could have been murdered, the door locked from the inside, and the killer could have escaped through the same window the policeman entered. Or he could have been poisoned by a family member and the door was locked from outside the room with a duplicate key. But speculation is never prof.

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You can’t always be sure, but suspect that a body might already have maggots in the lungs if the deceased is found outside, in a barn, shed, or in an area where there are no screens or doors.

This is why we have autopsies.

I hope I will never witness this type of removal again, and for you the same. Depending on where you practice, the medical examiner's team would probably take charge of the removal and a bio-hazardous company would respond for the clean-up. But things were different back then. Our profession was different back then. And to name just a few examples: we didn't have pagers or cell phones; there was no air-conditioning in the vehicles and embalming room; proper ventilation in the embalming room was still unknown; body lifts were thought to be unnecessary (still are by some); and most employees (owners, too) knew what a broom was for — to sweep the sidewalk and gutter in front of the funeral home at the start of every workday, weather permitting.

The common housefly, that nasty flying insect, is found throughout the world. The genus and species is *Musca domestica* Linnaeus, which is a fancy name for something that is a carrier of anthrax, cholera, typhoid, dysentery and other horrible diseases. I've been told that there are over 40,000 species of flies. There is much information on Google and at your local library about flies if you are interested. I'm not. The only thing I'm interested in is if a fly touches food I'm about to eat, I don't eat it. And the effect they may have on the dead human body entrusted to our care.

Our technical support line at Dodge Company receives more than a few calls every year, especially during the summer months, about problems with flies. The heartbreaking scenario I've heard all too often is the following: The family is more than pleased with arrangements and how the deceased looked. On the morning of the funeral they kneel at the casket to say "goodbye" and see maggots coming from the nostrils. They point this out to the funeral director, and then go silent. Later the funeral home is contacted by an attorney. Don't think this can't happen to you. "What could I have done differently?" the caller asks in failed desperation.

Nothing is foolproof, but here are some things you might consider.

Always pack the nostrils with Webril Cotton saturated with Dry Wash II after aspiration and the removal of nasal hair following the arterial injection. I do this just prior to putting Kalon Massage Cream on the face. Strips of Webril 1" x 6" or so will suffice. Dry Wash II is not an insecticide, but we have observed that it will smother and kill maggots. The chemical and barrier will also repel and prevent a fly from entering a nostril.

Dennis is an active funeral director and embalmer in the Boston area. He divides his time between calling on funeral homes in Massachusetts and taking technical calls in the home office (Cambridge, MA).

Dennis Daulton



Place a piece of plastic over the nostrils and face at the conclusion of the embalming procedure. Apply gently because any pulling can distort the features. The plastic acts as an additional barrier into the nostrils and also slows the drying and evaporation of the massage cream.

Flies usually enter the embalming room the same way we do — through the door. If you see a fly in the room, turn off the lights and open the door. It will go towards sunlight or a light outside the open door.

You can't always be sure, but suspect that a body might already have maggots in the lungs if the deceased is found outside, in a barn, shed, or in an area where there are no screens or doors. And if you see maggots on or about the body, be assured that they are already in the nose and lungs.

To thoroughly treat, once the body is on the table and up on body rests, put your nasal aspirator on your fresh water tubing (not your aspirator tubing) and place it into a nostril. If you do not have a nasal aspirator, use a 1/4" arterial tube. You need to force water into the lungs to flush out maggots and flies that most assuredly are in the lungs. Do both nostrils. Then put the nasal aspirator on your aspiration tubing and aspirate. Additionally, remove the nasal aspirator from the tubing and place the end into each nostril the best you can, pinching the opposite side. Some have discovered maggots in the nostrils of autopsied cases. So be vigilant.

Cavity aspiration and the injection of cavity chemical following arterial injection should complete the job. Finally, heavily pack the nostrils with cotton saturated with Dry Wash II.

Say a prayer.

Consider having an up-to-date disaster kit in your removal vehicle. I wrote about this in March of 1999, in an article titled "The Disaster Kit." You can read it on the private side of our website at www.dodgeco.com. Or feel free to contact us or your Dodge representative for a copy. Your kit should include several cans of an over-the-counter aerosol fly and maggot spray such as Raid®. As the saying goes, "Don't leave home (the funeral home that is) without it." We never know what challenges we may encounter on even the most routine removal.

I don't mean to cause undue alarm. But what we learn from hearing from so many on our technical line at Dodge is something we need to share in this publication so that every deceased is properly cared for, and that every family is properly served. A little time and a few precautions will go a long ways in avoiding a very embarrassing, a very emotional, and a very costly situation.

For years I've often thought about how sad it was that a man whose profession was that of providing for the well-being of others could end up in such a deplorable physical state. But this is only one example of what might happen when the living, due to time restraints and other circumstances, are delayed from caring for the dead.

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