The pains of obesity do not only affect those who are obese. The ever-expanding waistlines of North Americans costs governments and taxpayers billions of dollars annually. These increases have also hit the pockets of those in the funeral service industry, who have had to adjust by buying equipment capable of handling this sizable challenge.

In their most recent comprehensive study, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report that more than one third of adults in America – that’s over 72 million people – are obese. The obesity rate has increased dramatically in the last 25 years, doubling among adults between 1980 and 2004, the CDC reports. Although the rates have not significantly increased between 2003 and 2006, it’s clear that this issue will not resolve itself.

Statistics Canada reports that in 2004, 23.1 percent – that’s 5.5 million adults – were obese. The Canadian Medical Association estimates that obesity cost $1.8 billion in health expenditure in 1997 alone; making 2.4 percent of the entire year’s health expenditure spent on obesity-related health problems.

For the funeral industry professional, crematory operator, emergency medical technician, cremation equipment manufacturer or supplier, obesity presents several challenges – anything from the challenge of transporting an obese decedent in a dignified way to properly cremating a case without damaging the retort or lift mechanism.

When it comes to burial or a casketed cremation, oversized caskets are a dreaded necessity for many funeral homes. Keith and Julane Davis, owners of Goliath Casket Inc., which sells finished caskets capable of holding cases anywhere between 350 to 1,000 pounds, work with funeral homes to insure that the family and the funeral home will have a successful and dignified service for a decedent of larger size.

“Imagine the hurt you would feel when your bigger-than-life relative dies and the funeral home says they cannot provide a casket! This is our driving force. We are here for one reason – to give peace and comfort to both the family and the funeral home by providing a casket that is dignified and functional with integrity,” Keith said.

Keith’s father, Forrest Davis, worked for about 30 years as a welder for a casket manufacturing business. When he retired in 1985, he was disturbed that very little concern was given to the manufacture of oversized caskets because of the low sales volume, unpractical design and little interest. Forrest sat down at the kitchen table with his wife Mary and they designed some of
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the first oversized caskets “that you would be proud to put your mother in,” Forrest would say.

Keith and Julane joined the business in 1990 and now sell about over 200 oversized caskets per year, direct to funeral homes. While funeral homes don’t necessarily stock their caskets, manufacturers are glad to have someone they could go to when they needed an oversized casket when they need one.

There are many points to consider if you have the need for an oversized casket, Keith says. First, be prepared to get creative. The service may need to be moved to another location depending on the size of the doorway or hallway; the casket may not fit into the hearse; and if the decedent desired cremation for his or her remains, check to make sure this is possible with your machinery first.

Just as hospitals have had to start carrying extra-large hospital gowns, wider ambulances and heavy-duty removal cots, those transporting a decedent have also had to get special equipment to do the job in a dignified (and not back-breaking) manner.

CANA member Rick Bailey, a Funeral Director at Parker Mortuary in Joplin, Missouri, purchased the Med Sled First Call to help with some of the more difficult removals. In fact, the first day he received the Med Sled, he received a call for a 6’7”, 550-lb. decedent on the second floor in the back of the house, down a narrow and cluttered hallway, he said. Bailey recommends the First Call Removal sled to anyone who cannot afford a larger, bariatric cot.

After using the sled for emergency evacuations, people in the funeral industry started taking notice. "The funeral home industry came to me and said, 'Hey, help!'" There are so many back injuries in the funeral industry, so what I’m proud of is that we’ve created a product that can help people do their job in a dignified manner and recognize the family’s feelings at the same time," Med Sled CEO and Founder Clifford Adkins said.

Equipment that can handle heavy cases has become increasingly necessary, including hydraulic lifts.

"There is a comfort level going with extra heavy duty equipment. From time to time we’ve talked to people who have worked with lighter-weight equipment and have had cases where they have had larger than average cases and have bent their lift mechanisms," said Gary Forston, owner of custom lift equipment company Forston and Associates Inc.

The obesity issue isn’t going away any time soon. “For what it’s worth, sales do seem to be going stronger than ever,” Forston said.

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with dignity the memory of the deceased should be adopted, such as a plaque or stone which records the name of the deceased” as stated in the Order of Christian Funeral 417.

Catholic Crematories

Since cremation has become permissible for Catholics, the issue of Catholic cemeteries adding a cremation facility on their properties has also been reviewed. The CCC report states, “these facilities could provide authentic Catholic education about Catholic funeral and burial, including cremation; assure opportunities for families to avail themselves of all the liturgical rites of the Church; ensure quality and economical services, including preferential options for the poor.”

The report recommends that those wishing to add cremation services to a Catholic cemetery collaborate with building designers, cremation equipment manufacturers to be sure that the architecture of the space, its furnishings, policies and practices send the message that the facility is Catholic.

Conclusion

“In Search of a Catholic Cremation Tradition” provides much more information than outlined here in this article. In it you will find the Catholic Model for Addressing Cremation Issues, which outlines how to conduct the at-need arrangements conference, interment options at a Catholic cemetery, the liturgy and education, and much more.

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plenty of them. Let me know if you’re interested in having me speak to your management team about what you can do to develop the marks of distinction.

Mark Sanborn, CSP, CPAE is president of Sanborn & Associates, Inc., an idea studio for leadership development. He is the author of several books including Upgrade! Proven Strategies for Dramatically Increasing Personal and Professional Success and The Fred Factor: Every Person’s Guide to Making the Ordinary Extraordinary. Sanborn has shared his expertise on leadership, change, teamwork and service strategy in over 1,700 speeches and seminars in every state and 10 foreign countries. To learn more about Sanborn, visit his Web site, http://www.marksanborn.com.