

Eyes Wide Shut:

A non-embalmer at an embalming seminar

Kay Paku of Evans Funeral Services in Gisborne was the winner of the 2013 FDANZ President's Award writing competition. Her prize was an all-expenses paid trip to the Dodge Seminars in Hawaii in February. This is her report from the seminars.



I have the greatest respect for embalmers – I couldn't do what they do. Watching someone's features being set makes me grip my nasal septum and close one eye.

Attend an embalming seminar? Sure. Can I keep one eye closed?

Unnecessary as it turns out. To get myself in the mood for the week-long Dodge Seminar in Hawaii, I picked up the Kindle version of Mary Roach's "Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers". That kind of holiday reading'll get you kicked off the beach. Perfect though, for a non-embalming funeral director.



The Kiwi contingent: Kay and Tony, John and Anne, Neil and Jane, Barrie and Gail.

78 delegates from around the world met in February at the Royal Lahaina Resort in Maui, Hawaii for fifteen sessions over five days. My attendance a generous prize from FDANZ.

All of the sessions were fascinating and informative, and I managed to keep both eyes open – albeit in a squint for some.

As my reading material of choice took me on a journey of disembodied heads, I watched the reconstruction of an unrecognisable head and face. It was a show stopper – think 10000-piece jigsaw where all the pieces are the same colour and none of them interlock. "Working from the known to the unknown", from the base of the skull to the front occipital, can only be described as an exercise in patience and commitment. Alas, poor Yorick: by the end of the process I knew him very, very well.

As Mary Roach mused about the impact on a family when their loved one chooses to donate their body to science, the University of Hawaii's Steven Labrash introduced us to Fred, and Claire.

"The Story of Claire", filmed at the university, records the long-term embalming of a woman who donated her body to science. Claire's husband Fred watched with us - and kept both eyes open. We were reassured in advance that we need not worry about Fred, it would be the third time he had watched it. It was a consciously dignified journey. Without aspiration.

Equally fascinating was the visual impact of a body without bones following tissue harvesting. To see a body reminiscent of a deflated balloon – or noodle-ised if you're Mary Roach – makes you shake your head. I've since met a family faced with just that, and have to agree with embalmers extraordinaires Jack Adams, Tom Buist and Vernie Fountain: reconstruction is worth it.

I had seen photos of sectional plastination, and the thought of the bandsaw... both eyes closed. Standing at a table with two bandsawed brain sections, two plastinised heads, two hands, a heart - oh, and a pufferfish - I mused that having a sign saying "Do Not Touch" wasn't even necessary. Until the embalmers approached the table.



Two bandsawed brain sections, two heads, two hands, a heart, and a pufferfish.

I don't know about the embalmers in the audience, but Kim Collison's sessions on infectious diseases made me contemplate wearing gloves semi-permanently. With now-common bacteria and viruses able to live for more than a month in an embalmed body, in disinfectant and on bars of soap it is hard to justify the still-common practice of not gloving up for transfers. And make those nitrile gloves please - latex becomes porous when wet, whether from the inside or outside. Hand washing remains the most effective way of ridding the hands of germs, provided you sing the ABC song from start to finish before turning off the tap. True story.

Collison also cautioned against using home products to disinfect in our workplaces, and recommended that those items that cannot be disinfected – wooden head blocks for example – be discarded. New diseases mean new rules, and "...just because you've always done it, doesn't mean you have to go on doing it."

I guess in those words lie a reminder of the true value of keeping up our training hour credits – the opportunity to apply what we learn, make changes to move with the times and thus become better at what we do.

A huge thank you to FDANZ for the opportunity. I'm off to read Mary Roach's "Packing for Mars" now – never know where I'll end up next.