



COVID-19: Tending to Bodies and Preventive and Protective Measures for Nunavik Health Professionals

Preamble

This document presents the interim recommendations of the Nunavik Department of Public Health (DPH) in case of COVID-19-related deaths. These recommendations are largely based on the document “COVID-19 : Mesures de prévention et de protection pour les entreprises de services funéraires” of the *Institut national de santé publique du Québec*, June 2020, available online [in French only] at: <https://www.inspq.gc.ca/publications/2913-mesures-services-funeraires-covid19>.

The information presented in this document will be updated according to the pandemic’s evolution and advances in knowledge in this area.

Introduction

The disease is known as COVID-19 but the virus has been identified as SARS-CoV-2.

In Québec, funeral operations are governed by the *Funeral Operations Act*, Chapter A-5.02, and the *Regulation respecting the Funeral Operations Act* (r.1). Schedule I lists the diseases and infections presenting a public-health hazard; COVID-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has been added to this Schedule. Schedule III lists the exempted municipalities and territories, which include the northern communities of Nunavik.

1. Risks of Spreading COVID-19

The current data indicate that SARS-CoV-2 spreads primarily through contact with droplets of respiratory secretions from a positive case. The virus can also be found in stools and blood. Surfaces can be contaminated for periods from a few hours to a few days depending on conditions of heat and humidity. The virus can spread through contact with infected surfaces, followed by hand contact with the mouth, nose or eyes (mucosa).





Opportunistic airborne transmission (fine droplets of infected, aerosolized respiratory or other secretions) can also occur during operations that risk generating aerosols. There is increasing evidence that transmission can also occur during the pre-symptomatic period of the infection.

2. Patient Deceased from a Cause Other than COVID-19

It is important to note that there are no funeral-services businesses in Nunavik. When a death occurs on the Nunavik territory, whether in a health-care setting or elsewhere, in general, persons associated with a church (often referred to as woman's auxiliaries or morticians) are the ones who tend to the body and proceed with the preparation (dressing, etc.) and placement in a coffin, most often constructed locally. These teams are available in each northern village. Sometimes, although rarely, a community's nurses are required to place a body in a body bag.

Responsibility for construction of coffins varies depending on community: in general, employees of the Kativik Municipal Housing Bureau (KMHB) or church volunteers assume the task, but municipal employees, employees of the Kativik Regional Government (KRG) or those of the health centres' technical services can also be involved.

In the case of a death not related to COVID-19, the usual procedure, with the participation of woman's auxiliaries, can be followed. However, given the possibility of asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19, the Nunavik DPH recommends that during such operations woman's auxiliaries wear full personal protective equipment (PPE): eye protection, mask, gown and gloves.

When a death occurs when the patient was receiving care in Montréal or when a body must undergo an autopsy, for example at the coroner's request, the embalming services of the Collins Clarke MacGillivray White Funeral Homes (located on Sherbrooke Street West, Montréal) are generally retained by the authorities of the health centres or the northern villages of Nunavik. The embalmed body is then transported in a coffin by Air Inuit or Canadian North to the deceased's community of residence in Nunavik.

In both situations (death occurred in Nunavik or repatriation of the body from outside the region), viewing arrangements and the funeral ceremony can be assumed by the religious community. The physical-distancing measures in effect (two metres between persons) must be respected at all times during ceremonies. Moreover, as long as restrictions on get-togethers have not been lifted by the Nunavik Regional Emergency Preparedness Advisory Committee (N-REPAC) and the director of Public Health, the number of visitors should be limited to four or five persons, if possible exclusively to the immediate family. Once the restrictions are lifted, these

recommendations will continue to apply in the communities that have active COVID-19 cases (non-COVID-FREE).

3. Patient Deceased from COVID-19

Contrary to the provisions of section 138 of the *Regulation respecting the Funeral Operations Act* (Ch. A-5.02, r.1), authorization by the regional director of Public Health of the region in question is not necessary before tending to the body of an individual deceased from COVID-19. However, it is essential for the presence of the disease to be mentioned on the form for declaration of death (Death SP-3 form). Moreover, the persons tending to the body must systematically be informed in case of presence of COVID-19 among the causes that contributed to the death as well as the presence of a health hazard.

Handling of the body must be performed to limit, as much as possible, emissions of gases or liquids from the respiratory tracts, particularly by avoiding pressure on the thorax. The body must be placed in a well-sealed, leak-proof body bag (if there are doubts about leaks, consider a double bag). The body's surface and the structure on which it rests are likely to be contaminated by the virus, as is the exterior of the body bag, even though it is well sealed. These surfaces and the exterior of the body bag must be disinfected and must be handled with gloves. The body must be identified with a label indicating the presence of COVID-19.

The procedure also stipulates that:

- there is no disinfection of the body;
- there is no embalming;
- there is no preparation of the body (dressing, etc.);
- rituals involving direct contact with the body are not permitted (possibility with specific agreement with the Nunavik DPH for a ritual involving no contact with the body);
- the deceased's personal effects (clothing, towels, etc.) are to be placed in quarantine for a seven-day period or machine-washed in hot water with the usual detergent (or non-washable items are to be disinfected) before being returned to the family;
- the body must be placed in a rigid, closed coffin to ensure safe handling;
- as for viewing (closed coffin, no physical contact permitted with the deceased), for an unembalmed body, arrange two periods of a maximum of 3 hours within the 48 hours after the death, separated by at least 3 hours of refrigeration at $\leq 4^{\circ}\text{C}$;

- burial is to be carried out quickly. If doing so is not possible, the body may be stored under refrigeration at $\leq 4^{\circ}\text{C}$. However, for periods longer than 10 days, the body must be stored at a temperature of -9°C or lower.¹ The INSPQ recommends use of two zones for COVID-19 deceased and other deceased if an area cannot be reserved exclusively for COVID-19 deceased. The facilities for that purpose in Nunavik are too limited for application of that recommendation; in these circumstances, it is essential to indicate the presence of the disease clearly on the outside of the coffin.

The physical-distancing measures in effect (two metres between persons) must be respected at all times during ceremonies. Moreover, as long as restrictions on get-togethers have not been lifted by the N-REPAC and the director of Public Health, the number of visitors should be limited to four or five persons, if possible exclusively to the immediate family. Once the restrictions are lifted, these recommendations will continue to apply in the communities that have active COVID-19 cases (non-COVID-FREE).

For detailed procedures describing the preventive and protective measures to be applied by funeral-services businesses, consult *“COVID-19 : Mesures de prévention et de contrôle des infections pour les entreprises de services funéraires”* (INSPQ, June 2020, in French only) or the *“Guide de gestion des décès reliés à la COVID-19”* (INSPQ June 2020, available online, in French only, at <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/publications/2975-guide-gestion-deces-covid19>). Those provisions should also apply in the case of deaths that occurred in a health-care setting in Nunavik.

3.1. Particularities in the Case of a Patient Deceased from COVID-19 in Nunavik (in a Health Centre, CLSC or Other)

In the case of a COVID-19 death in Nunavik, the usual procedure in which the woman’s auxiliaries of the village concerned prepare the body cannot apply. The persons who tend to a body in this context must apply all the preventive and protective measures to avoid contaminating the environment and spreading the disease to other persons.

It would be difficult to ensure that woman’s auxiliaries, while respecting the applicable instructions, appropriately use full protective equipment (which normally requires training): procedural mask, eye protection, waterproof overclothing and gloves for working with a body. Rather, as exception, the Nunavik DPH proposes, in the case of a

¹ Regulation respecting the identification, transportation, preservation or keeping, custody and return or remittal of dead bodies, objects and documents (Ch. R-0.2, r. 3), section 18. Available at <http://legisquebec.gouv.qc.ca/en/ShowDoc/cr/R-0.2,%20r.%203>.

COVID-19 death that occurs in a northern village, that clearly identified persons of a health centre or CLSC, trained in protective measures, systematically place the body in a body bag according to the procedure recommended by the *INSPQ*. In case of doubt as to waterproofness, use a second body bag.

3.2. Particularities in the Case of a Patient Deceased from COVID-19 Outside the Region Requiring Repatriation to Nunavik

In the case of a COVID-19 death outside Nunavik, the Collins Clarke MacGillivray White Funeral Homes (Montréal), after agreement with the Ungava Tulattavik Health Centre (UTHC) or the Inuulitsivik Health Centre (IHC), should recover the body, place it in a body bag and transport it to the facilities of the funeral-services business. There are then two possibilities for repatriating the body to the home community in Nunavik (the family is consulted through the authorities of the IHC or the UTHC):

1. The body may be cremated and the ashes then repatriated to Nunavik;
2. The body (in a body bag) may be placed in a sturdy, sealed coffin, in accordance with the procedure recommended by the *INSPQ*. The coffin could then be transported to Nunavik by Air Inuit or Canadian North, which must, however, accept to transport it beforehand.

The virus can spread from the body of a person deceased from COVID-19 to persons who touch the body voluntarily or accidentally. **The Nunavik DPH strongly recommends that the families of deceased agree to cremation where possible.** The ashes of a deceased person do not constitute a risk of transmitting the disease and can be transported by air without restriction. In cases where the family absolutely insists on burial of the body, it will be essential to seal the coffin to ensure impossibility of opening it.

1. Death from a cause other than COVID-19

2. Death related to COVID-19

Normal procedure, i.e.:

- Declaration of death
- If death occurred outside Nunavik or case submitted to coroner, the body is to be tended to and embalmed/cremated by funeral-services business and transported to community of residence
- Tending to the body, preparation (dressing, etc.) and placement in a coffin by community (woman's auxiliaries or morticians): eye protection, mask, gown and gloves
- Usual funeral ritual
- Viewing possible in open coffin
- Physical distancing during ceremonies (more than two metres between persons)*

- Mention of COVID-19 on declaration of death
- Body identified with COVID-19 label
- Notice of presence of COVID-19 and health hazard to persons tending to body
- No disinfection of body
- No embalming
- No preparation of the body (dressing, etc.)
- No funeral ritual, barring agreement with Nunavik DPH
- Deceased's personal effects placed in seven-day quarantine or washed in hot water and usual detergent, then returned to family
- Well-sealed, leak-proof body bag (in case of doubt about leaks, consider double bag), sealed coffin (no possibility of opening)
- For viewing (in a closed coffin): maximum twice for 3 hours, within 48 hours of death, with body refrigerated for 3 hours at $\leq 4^{\circ}\text{C}$ between periods
- Rapid burial, otherwise store body at $\leq 4^{\circ}\text{C}$
- Physical distancing during ceremonies (more than two metres between persons)*

Patient deceased in Nunavik (at health centre, CLSC or elsewhere)

- Insertion of body into body bag and coffin by adequately trained personnel of health centre or CLSC
- Personnel adequately protected (PPE)

Patient deceased outside region, to be repatriated to Nunavik

- Insertion of body into body bag by funeral-services business
- Cremation or placement in a sturdy, sealed coffin and transportation to Nunavik
- Personnel adequately protected (PPE)

*As long as restrictions on get-togethers have not been lifted or if there are active COVID-19 cases in the community (non-COVID-FREE community), the number of visitors should be limited to four or five persons, if possible exclusively to the immediate family.