



DNA In the Mortuary

By Daniel S. Greenberg

Science has opened a fresh path to profitability for the funeral industry, which for some time has been at a dead end, so to speak, in developing new products. "I imagine every funeral home will have this," a funeral director in Ohio told the Associated Press. He was referring to a service that, for \$350, provides the bereaved with a DNA analysis of the deceased, derived from a bit of hair, blood and a swab of mouth tissue taken after death.

Kinfolk who sign up for the service will get a confidential DNA report, while the lab doing the work will store the specimens for 25 years, should the need arise for further examination. What need? The shadow of death invites discretion on the assorted possibilities. But the strong selling point for the funeral industry is that a little DNA might illuminate serious issues of inheritance, health, crime and who knows what else in the distant past that could be of considerable value in the murky future.

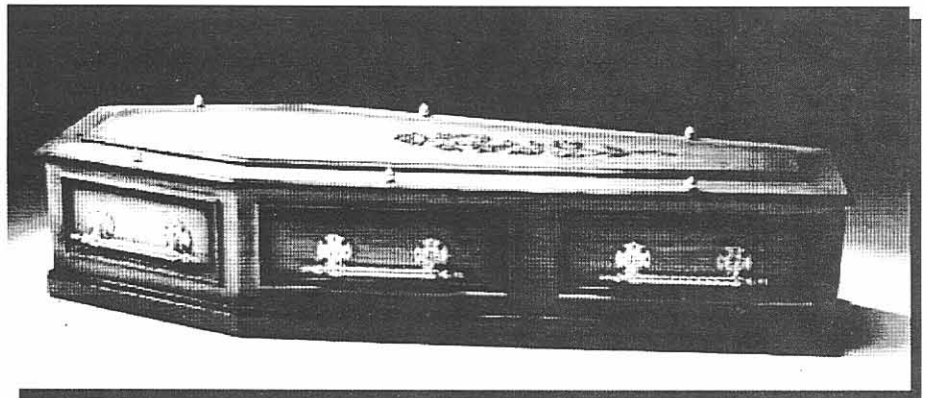
While molecular historians had to stretch a bit to nail Thomas Jefferson for an inappropriate relationship nearly two centuries ago, a store of promptly collected post-mortem DNA would be an analytical cinch. Some ethicists cringe at taking samples from the non-consenting dead for purposes that might be used against them. And there are concerns about how accurately the data might be interpreted in determining hereditary health risks. But these quibbles are not likely to derail the union of science and undertaking.

The DNA product arrives at a time of need for the funeral industry, which has been in a technological backwater for many years. Fancier coffins and more elaborate monuments have probably gone as far as they can go in providing economic growth.

When it comes to new technol-

ogy, the source of revenue growth for many industries, the funeral business has been a loser.

In fact, it's never caught up with the embalming techniques of the ancient Egyptians. And it's doubtful that it could match the preservation job that Soviet science performed on Lenin, who still looks as if he's taking a mid-day nap in a business suit, 74 years after he passed away.



For a time, it seemed that the funeral industry might find a technological uplift in the deep-freeze movement, which was predicated on the expectation that disease cures discovered after the departure of the deceased could be retroactively applied. Hence the battle cry of high-tech resurrection: Freeze, wait, reanimate.

At great cost, believers in this technology have been stored away in deep, sub zero, nitrogen-filled containers, awaiting the requisite advance of medicine. However, no one has yet made it back from cryogenic limbo. And some of those awaiting revival are out of the running because of inadvertent thawing due to breakdowns in the refrigeration system. Nonetheless, among the faithful, confidence in freezing and returning remains strong.

But the movement has failed to develop mass appeal. Without a line of

new technologies to invigorate its business, the funeral industry has relied heavily on marketing as a competitive device. Whereas consumers can be persuaded to buy an unneeded TV or a replacement for a properly functioning refrigerator, the market for funerals inelastically matches the number of deaths. So, within that boundary, the industry strives for market share with various offers and deals.

"Pre-need" arrangements are aimed at sealing a sale before the customer needs it. And then there's a trend toward tie-ins between hospices and funeral homes. The combination might suggest a conflict of interest, but it's taking hold in some places. At this point, DNA analysis is an optional extra to the standard funeral package -- like stereo radio or automatic transmission in the early days of automobile sales.

But time and a marketing push surely will make it the standard before moving on to offers of deluxe DNA analysis and maybe even interpretation. Science has revoked the old adage that dead men tell no tales. And the funeral industry is catching on to the marketplace possibilities.

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