

Green light for

The traditional business of funeral directing is being shaken up by the green phenomenon. While people are increasingly choosing a greener way of life, the funeral industry is responding by offering alternatives to its conventional approach to the dead. East & Bays Courier reporter MICHELLE COOKE finds out about the different options.

Supporters of eco funerals say people are becoming more aware of the negative impacts a funeral can have on the environment.

Emissions and leakages of chemicals such as formaldehyde, used in coffins and the embalming process, are said to have the most harmful effects.

But now there are other options. People can opt for an eco funeral, or a natural burial.

Coffin designer Greg Holdsworth owns Kingsland business Return to Sender and says it is society that's driving the change.

The Sandringham man has been making caskets from sustainably harvested and untreated wood for three years and recently expanded his business premises.

Instead of metal-coated plastic handles, which are buried or cremated with the coffin, Mr Holdsworth's designs have built in handles.

"Some funeral directors find it very odd but so many young people I talk to think it's a no-brainer."

When Te Papa chief executive Seddon Bennington was buried in one of Mr Holdsworth's artisan caskets in July, a "mind-shift" occurred among funeral directors, he says.

Some, who he considers to be the most conservative, have requested his coffins on behalf of their clients.

"You could say that eco caskets are still being avoided by the silent majority of funeral directors who don't want to believe things are changing," he says.

"Most of my clients are an interesting mix of 'green to the core' operators and mainstream early adopters, some of whom are industry leaders who have made an effort to embrace new designs and take stock of their environmental impact."

An Environment Ministry sustainable design document says most coffins used in New Zealand are made from MDF, which traditionally "contains high quantities of formaldehyde and other toxins".

It is estimated that out of

the 29,000 New Zealanders who died last year, 95 percent of them were buried or cremated in MDF coffins.

"That's more than a million kilograms of MDF and 15,000kg of metal-plated plastic handles," the document says.

The document also says the toxins that could potentially be released into the environment through burial or cremation are connected to nasal and lung cancer and associated with asthma, nausea and eye and throat irritation.

Funeral Directors Association of New Zealand president Neil Little says his family's business Davis Funerals needs to adopt a more systematic approach to the environmental funeral options it offers because it is getting more and more requests.

The Mt Eden company includes Mr Holdsworth's caskets among a more standard range.

Mr Little says while some funeral directors may be reluctant to change there's no denying there's a market.

"I can't see it taking over

but there is a sector there. If someone came in here tomorrow and said that's what we want, we would move heaven and earth to get it. We try to do what the family wants - to respond and meet those needs."

Embalming is the process in which blood is replaced by embalming fluid, for the purpose of preservation, sanitation and presentation. The fluid includes formaldehyde.

The body can also be preserved by refrigeration, which is a service Davis Funerals and some other companies offer.

Lynda Hannah, who started New Zealand's first eco funeral company Living Legacies nine years ago, says environmental-friendly alternatives to embalming fluids include dry ice and essential oils.

"A body will last for three days comfortably without being embalmed, sometimes longer," she says.

The Nelson-based funeral facilitator says she has had a few people say to her they wish they had known earlier about the different options available.

eco funerals



Leading the way: Greg Holdsworth says his unique designs, made from rimu, poplar and plywood, have little negative impact on the environment compared to MDF, which is used in 95 percent of coffins. Instead of metal-coated plastic handles, his caskets have them built in.

The newest and perhaps most exciting option is New Zealand's first natural burial site, which opened in Wellington last year.

The deceased, which must not be embalmed, are buried in a biodegradable coffin or shroud only 70cm deep, where the soil is richer.

Instead of a headstone, a tree is planted in its place.

There is a section in Waikumete Cemetery in west Auckland for natural burials but Mr Holdsworth and Mr Little suspect its low-usage is because of its unappealing location.

Ms Hannah travelled to the

United Kingdom two years ago to visit some of the hundreds of natural burial sites there.

Councils around New Zealand are looking into it but the process is dragging because of the law, which she is trying to get changed.

In the United Kingdom people are allowed to be buried on private land - in New Zealand, they are not.

Ms Hannah says it will take a long time to get back from the "current extreme", which is council-operated cemeteries that are filled with concrete and "rows and rows of plastic flowers".

"Councils are notoriously slow to bring about change but I think in the next 10 years lots will spring up."

Mr Holdsworth agrees.

"There's a lot of people talking about it in Auckland but nothing's come to fruition yet," he says.

"But now the mould has been set it will be easier for the others."

• Auckland's Natural Funeral Company and State of Grace provide a sustainable approach to funeral directing. Many traditional funeral directors in Auckland offer eco funeral options.



One final statement: Eco funerals are finding their way into the mainstream funeral industry. Coffin designer Greg Holdsworth is one of a number of people who are starting to offer alternatives to the norm.

Photo: AMELIA JACOBSEN