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Even in Death

Retaining Transgender Identity

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My father was dressed as a man for the viewing; The name on the coffin was the legal female name with the alias of the previous male name; The service was conducted in my father's previous male name; The registered death certificate was for a female.

Three weeks ago my Father died. My father was a transgendered (male-to-female) person. My father had made attempts to have a sex change in the mid 1960s. At that time I was in my early teens. On seeking psychiatric assistance at the time, my father was informed by the psychiatrist "You are a man with three daughters. One day they will have children and you will be a grandfather. Go home, and don't be so silly."

... the choices a transgendered person has made in life, need to also be respected during hospitalisation and death

At least that is how my father interpreted whatever remark his psychiatrist made at that time. Subsequent years were bouts of drunken violence and rages, attacking those my father perceived as 'stopping his dream' – my mother, my sisters, and myself.

Fast forward to the late 1980s, early 1990s. My father pursues his dream. He commences the path to gender reassignment. Immediately prior to his first formal steps to gender reassignment he had been assessed by a geriatrician as 'developing dementia'. This did not deter him from his goal, nor did it deter subsequent psychiatrists and medical specialists he consulted.

My father formally divorced my mother (he claimed that it was on the advice of his psychiatrist), lived in Tiresias House for a period of time, and lived separately from my mother for the period required to comply with reassignment rules.

He underwent the range of medical tests and procedures required, only to be told after the castration and partial creation of a vagina, that the last two or three operations could not be completed due to a pre-existing heart condition (that had been present for twenty years prior to the first operation). After the operations he returned to live with my mother, maintained seeing his specialists – despite his endocrinologist 'accidentally' placing him on testosterone, instead of female hormones for several months, and legally changed his name from his male name to a suitably female (though partially unisex) name that he chose and loved.

He lived as a woman with my mother for most of the last fifteen years of his life - though my mother, now legally divorced from him, never accepted the decisions he made about his changed identity. As he aged and dementia became more pronounced, however, he would ask my mother why he had no penis. He would dress as a woman some days, a man on others, and somewhere in-between at other times.

Fast forward to mid 2004. My father develops a severe urinary tract infection (any correlation to previous operations is unclear), and symptoms of ill-controlled diabetes. He is admitted to the local general hospital. His local G.P. tells my mother: "Last time he came to see me he had trousers on. We will admit him as a man."

My father is admitted to a male ward under his female name and within a week of his hospitalisation he began to be referred to by a hybrid name - half of his male name, coupled with half of his female name, a name he had never been known by, and which never was his legal name at any time in his life. He was neither one nor the other and remained referenced as this confusing mix of people calling him different names until his death in hospital two weeks later of Cardiorespiratory arrest, Diabetes, and Alzheimer's aged seventy-seven years.

As the eldest daughter assisting my grieving mother (she and my father had been together for fifty-six years) with funeral arrangements. I had the task (at my mother's request) of informing the funeral director that, although the hospital defined the person as male, the body has soft skin, long hair, fully formed breasts, and a partial vagina. The Western Suburbs based funeral director takes this news well.

Days of funeral organising are complicated by discussions about:

- What is the legal name?
- Is this a man or a woman?
- What name will be used on official documents?

- What name will be used at the funeral services?
- What name goes on the death certificate?
- Who is legally the next of kin?

Family views re: names extended from my own view of having a funeral as a woman maintaining the integrity of that person's choices and life, to my mother's view "No, he never would have wanted that!" (though this had never been discussed between them), to one sister's view "he would let her have what she wanted so she isn't embarrassed in front of the neighbours."

There were conversations with the funeral director and ministers re: she/him/her ... for example:

Funeral Director: Hope you don't mind. We shaved him/her.

Me: No that's fine.

Funeral Director: He ... um ... she ... um ... needed a facial shave ... I mean she did ... I'm sorry, she? he? Was that okay ... for him? her?

In the end:

- My father was dressed as a man for the viewing;
- The name on the coffin was the legal female name with the alias of the previous male name;
- The funeral service was conducted in my father's previous male name (my mother's demand);
- The hospital death certificate was for a man;
- The formal registered death certificate was for a female; and
- Centrelink payments which were being paid to a woman were immediately cancelled. (It was Centrelink who informed my mother the day after the funeral that, thanks to the divorce, she was not my father's next of kin.

So, why have I written this? I raise these issues for those in the transgendered community with prior partners and children who have had a range of acceptance/non-acceptance responses, to the choices the transgendered person has made. In the processes of dying and death these issues will continue to be confronted. The following may help:

- Write your wishes prior to hospitalisation about how you wish to be treated after death.
- Inform local doctors and hospital staff about your preference.
- Inform family members of what you want in the event of death, and preferred funeral arrangements.

I am sure there are many more suggestions I could make from having lived the life of a teenager with a father seeking transgender, and as the adult child of a transgendered parent. It is my belief that the choices a transgendered person has made in life, need to also be respected during hospitalisation and death. The integrity of the choices and struggles of the transgendered person's life deserve to be acknowledged and retained.

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The Gender Centre is committed to developing and providing services and activities, which enhance the ability of people with gender issues to make informed choices. We offer a wide range of services to people with gender issues, their partners, family members and friends in New South Wales. We are an accommodation service and also act as an education, support, training and referral resource centre to other organisations and service providers. The Gender Centre is committed to educating the public and service providers about the needs of people with gender issues. We specifically aim to provide a high quality service, which acknowledges human rights and ensures respect and confidentiality.