

Death doula has dying all wrapped up

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It's a relief to hear death doula Denise Love confirm that the person pictured on her website is alive. The peaceful-looking woman, wrapped in a white shroud, is actually a participant in one of Love's death doula training workshops. The picture is a re-enactment of a home funeral Love conducted.

Love is absolutely non-judgmental about the end-of-life wishes people have — she's there to support people — but she does have personal views about the way Western society approaches dying and death.

For one thing, funerals don't need to be lavish to be beautiful, she says.

Love, who is accustomed to using a queen-sized bedsheet to shroud some people's bodies, adds that funerals don't need to be formal either. "This whole thing of dressing a dead body," says Love. "If you've ever tried to do it, it's crazy."

Love is a rock of sorts for those affected by dying and death. She supports them with jobs like funeral arrangements, spending time with their loved ones and encouraging them through the process.

She assists people at home, in hospices and in the hospital and likens her role somewhat to event management.

"Sometimes we pick up the body from the hospital and take the person home to have a vigil at home for a day or two," says Love.

"We can use cold blankets and all sorts of things.

"If they don't want anything at home, I suggest sit with the people for a few hours until everybody has had enough, and then we farewell the body and get the funeral party in to take them away."

Love, a masters-qualified registered nurse, has been working in health since she started nursing as a 17-year-old. Today, she combines her doula role with work as a breastfeeding consultant, doula trainer, nurse, hypnotherapist and counsellor.

She is also the director of LifeOptions, a charity she runs with her husband, that supports the work of social change organisations in developing countries such as Cambodia and Myanmar.

This October, she is headed back to Australia to conduct death doula training workshops around the country.

She says she meets various people with an appetite for death doula work.

For her, it was her experience as a palliative care nurse that was formative in her gravitation towards the role. "It became really clear to me that if you give people love, support, knowledge and information, and if you hear their fears and anxieties, the need for medication is much much less when somebody is dying."