



How Important Are the Hands?

by *Tim Collison, CFSP*

How many people do we know who express themselves with their hands? My mom would always comment about such individuals by saying, "If their hands were tied behind them, they wouldn't have a thing to say." Their verbal communication is integrally tied to the use of their arms and hands, and this draws attention to them.

Some women take great pride in the appearance of their hands. They will spend substantial amounts of money for nail treatments and manicures, and use them as the showcase for their jewelry. Men as well will have manicures, and some enjoy wearing jewelry which also draws additional attention to their hands.

When we as funeral directors fully realize the importance of caring for the hands of the deceased and therefore recreate a pleasing, natural appearance, we help to achieve our first priority: to do all we can to help our families view a recognizable person in the casket. We know from experience that when a remains is viewed for the first time, what people see first is the face in its entirety. Next they narrow their focus to the mouth and eyes, and then they look at the hands. The sight of an old scar, a wedding band, or a hand once held in one's own represents an important connection with the person who has died and helps the bereaved to accept their loss. One's ability to reconcile the death of a loved one is greatly assisted by the viewing of familiar

aspects about the deceased. If we are going to present the body to the best of our abilities, we must also take care in treating the hands.

Look at your own hands for a moment. Notice the roundness of the fingertips, the variation in the skin tone from one part of your hand to another, the warm color

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across the knuckles. Only if we address these very fine details can we say that we have done all we could to restore the deceased. In many cases, the family may never mention how normal the hands appear. But you will know you have contributed to their satisfaction, and that a small amount of effort has given them a great degree of comfort.

Bruising. The back of the hand is often the site of post-mortem discoloration. Intravenous lines which have been in place for extended periods of time will often "blow" or allow blood to enter the tissue surrounding the puncture site. Bruising can also be caused by the removal of the I.V. after death. Venous pressure alone can force blood into the tissue in this area. Allowing the hand to remain lower than the level of the heart might also cause blood to seep out of a vein which has been punctured by an I.V. This bruising may or may not clear as a result of the arterial injection alone.

One treatment which can greatly alleviate this bruised appearance is the use of Basic Dryene intradermally. (See Figure 1.) Inject Basic Dryene hypodermically into the bruised area prior to the arterial embalming, and this chemical will begin to bleach out the discoloration from within — which I find better

than using an exterior pack. During the injection when the bleaching of the discoloration becomes adequate, place a cold water pack on the bruise. This will slow down the effect. Even if the bruised area becomes whiter than the surrounding skin, it is much easier to cosmetize a lighter area than a darker one.

If this type of treatment is not used, the bruised area will certainly require cosmetic application. Even if the deceased has had this bruise for a long time, the family will probably want you to camouflage it, and will find this restored look psychologically beneficial. Your attention to this detail will be noticed and appreciated by the family, even if they don't comment on it later.

There are several methods for covering small discolorations such as those you would find on the back of a hand. The cosmetic spray Undercoat provides an opaque base over which other cosmetics can be applied to match the surrounding skin tone. Immediately after spraying, lightly stippling the cosmetic into the skin will help reduce the pore-clogging which is responsible

for the artificial appearance so often seen when opaques are used. This stippling may reduce the opaqueness of the cosmetic and require an additional application of Undercoat — but the appearance of the skin surface will be preferable to what would

seen when using opaque creams such as Kalon Pigment. The oil base of the cosmetic will be absorbed into some skin surfaces, especially if there is a lack of preservation in the tissues, and this will reduce its covering effectiveness.

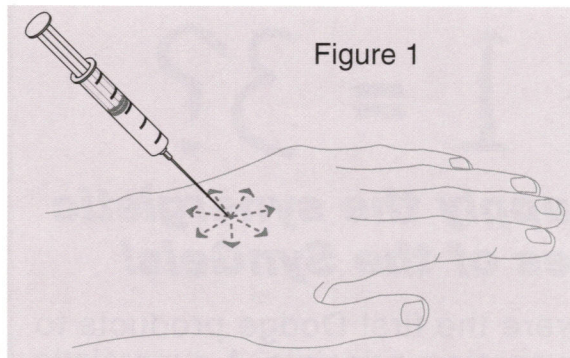


Figure 1

result without this procedure.

Another cosmetic which can be used very successfully as an opaque base is Perma Pigment. This liquid cosmetic is applied with a brush over the entire bruise. Again, this material should be lightly stippled before it is allowed to dry. It will form a dry, firm, opaque surface over which additional cosmetics may be used to duplicate the surrounding skin color. It is available in a variety of shades which can be used on virtually any complexion color.

The Kalon Pigments are probably used more than any other cosmetic for bruise covering. These oil-based pigments are the most opaque cream cosmetic that Dodge manufactures. By blending the various shades of Kalon Pigments, the cosmetician can eliminate the need to apply a base coat, so that the treatment of the bruised area can be completed in only one application.

When choosing an opaque base for bruise covering, select a shade which is slightly lighter than the surrounding unbruised tissue. Normally, when the additional cosmetics are applied to finish the bruise covering, it will be easier to add cosmetics which correct the shade by darkening, rather than by lightening. This will also allow some margin for possible "bleed through" of the underlying bruise, due to a slight fading of the opaque cosmetic. This potential fading can sometimes be

The selection of cosmetics which are used to finish cosmetizing a bruised area is dependent upon the coloration of the complexion. The most common error made, I believe, is an over-reliance on finishing cosmetics which are too brown-red such as Light, Dark, and Regular Suntan. To

reproduce natural skin tones, it is important to remember the three basic components of skin coloration: melanin, carotene, and hemoglobin. Melanin, a brown pigment, is the most predominant of the skin components. Hemoglobin produces the warm color areas of the skin, and is identifiable by the red tones which it exhibits. Carotene is the yellow component, and it is the most subtle of the pigments in the skin. When there is a flaw in the selection of cosmetics used for bruise covering, very often it is the lack of carotene coloring which is the culprit. You will often find as you blend cosmetics that adding a shade with a greater quantity of yellow pigment will enable you to achieve a closer match to the surrounding skin color.



Figure 2

One of my favorite cosmetics for using in this manner is Kalon Pigment Tangerine. While it looks quite orange in the container, it produces a very good blend (with excellent

covering ability) when mixed with other cosmetics. For use on lighter complexions, try the Tangerine shade blended with Peach or Natural. For darker complexions, blend Tangerine with darker shades of Kalon Pigments such as Dark Suntan and Dark Brown.

Wrinkles. Over the past several years, it has become much more common to receive remains which exhibit gross edema. We generally see this as a result of the introduction of intravenous fluids over the course of several days or weeks. On the plus side, we are usually able to attain very good fluid reduction through the use of waterless embalming and/or Edemaco. However, quite often the hands of the deceased are left with very prominent wrinkles on the backs. Using a tissue reducer (See Figure 2) seems intimidating to the uninitiated. However, it certainly can improve the appearance of hands which are marred by folds and wrinkles.

The most important point to remember when using a tissue reducer is that it should never be applied to bare skin. This will cause rapid dehydration and burning of the skin, and it will leave the skin surface brown and leathery. The heating element of the tissue reducer should only touch skin which has been liberally coated with White Kalon Massage cream. The rapid heating of the massage cream will cause the skin surface to tighten, but the cream itself will inhibit burning of the tissue. In the case of severe wrinkling, several applications of cream and repeated treatments with the tissue reducer may be required. This procedure can make a drastic improvement in the appearance of the hands. When done with care, it will leave the skin prepared for cosmetic application.

Flat Fingers. Are your fingertips flat? If they aren't, should the fingertips of the deceased be flat? This question was posed to me years ago by someone with whom I worked. I had been quite accustomed to feature building the

face of an emaciated case, but had never really given much thought to the hands. The use of Feature Builder on the fingertips (as well as any other part of the hand that requires it) is quite simple and quick. There should be no hesitation to hypodermically feature build the hands because of concerns about leakage. The use of a quality tissue building chemical such as Feature Builder eliminates the chances of chemical leaking from the injection site. Feature Builder gels very quickly when exposed to moisture. If there is very little moisture present in the tissues of a severely emaciated case, apply a pledget of cotton saturated with water for just a moment after removing the syringe. The hole from your hypo will not leak.

I like to use an 18 gauge 6" hypo needle for this purpose. In most cases, the entire finger can be treated from an injection site near the first knuckle. When the emaciation has reduced the finger to skin over bone, the embalmer should attempt to fill and round out the finger along its entire length, not

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just at the tip. This will not only reinstate a natural appearance to the finger; it will also improve the appearance of the hand.

The hands play an integral part in the appearance of the deceased. All of the procedures which have been outlined here require little time or effort. Incorporating them into your established work patterns will pay great dividends in terms of your families' appreciation.

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Since the retirement of Dick Sanders, Tim has become Dodge's primary educator in the areas of cosmetics and restorative arts. In addition, Tim represents Dodge in northern Michigan.

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