



The **Happy Humanist** is an emblem of the Humanist Association of Ireland and is the Irish version of the international symbol of Humanism.

## PEOPLE WITHOUT RELIGIOUS BELIEF

This section gives information on people with an absence of prescribed *religious* beliefs and rituals. There is no intention by the HSE to suggest uniformity between the groups mentioned in this section.

Sources indicate that up to 10% of the world's population is without any religious belief and these people are distributed across the continents.

# Summary of Essential Practice Points:

Please refer to the full text of the highlighted points related to the following summary points.

**Note:** *the headings and themes in this section have been amended in some places to meet the needs of people without religious belief.*

## **1** *Profile of people without religious belief in Ireland:*

The second largest response to the question on religion in Census 2006 was *No Religion*. This and other data indicate that there are a considerable number of people without religious belief in Ireland. People without religious belief may describe themselves as *Agnostic, Atheist, Humanist* or indicate that they have *No Religion*.

## **2** *Personal contacts and death-related practices:*

Source the name of a personal contact that can be called upon to support the person in times of critical need and who can give guidance to the healthcare setting on appropriate practice for the person.

## **3** *Family dynamics and decision making:*

The wishes of the person must be respected in situations where family are not aware of the absence of religious belief.

## **4** *Cleaning and touching the body:*

The normal washing and preparation procedure can be carried out.

## **5** *Religious icons and symbols:*

It is not appropriate to use icons from Christian or other traditions in the mortuary.

## **6** *Initiation ritual:*

There is no initiation ritual among these traditions and baptism of newborns in imminent danger of death is not appropriate.

## Profile of People Without Religious Belief in Ireland

### Essential Practice Point

1

People without religious belief include those who use the following descriptors:

- *Agnostic*: In the modern world agnosticism is taken to involve scepticism or doubt about the existence of a God presence.
- *Atheist*: Generally atheism involves an absence of belief in a God presence or other deities.
- *Humanist*: Humanism believes that striving for the greater good of humanity need not depend on belief in a God presence or any particular practices; rather it requires reason, compassion and a concern for the welfare of others. The Humanist Association of Ireland was established in the 1960s.

In Census 2006 186,000 persons indicated *No Religion*, which was the second largest response to the question on religious affiliation. An additional 15,000 people indicated that they were *Agnostic* and just over nine hundred indicated that they were *Atheist*. A further 70,322 were categorised as *Not Stated*, although it is not clear how many of these may have been indicating that they did not have a religious belief. There are no Census figures available for the number of Humanist followers in Ireland. The Humanist Association of Ireland indicates there are potentially a quarter of a million people in Ireland who do not have a religious belief.

Collectively people from these traditions may be Irish, from new communities or visitors from other countries to Ireland.

## Care of the ill and Care of the Dying

In the health services we value patient-centeredness and parity of treatment for all, irrespective of religious belief or no religious belief. We cannot make assumptions about people without religious belief and must seek clarity from the person or a personal contact provided by the person if in doubt.

### ***Personal contacts and death-related practices***

### Essential Practice Point

2

- Source the name of a personal contact that can be called upon to support the person in times of critical need and who can give guidance to the healthcare setting on appropriate practice for the person as needed.
- Do not assume that the person will wish to speak to a hospital Chaplain or avail of any religious services. Contributors to this section have indicated the embarrassment caused to members at having to 'opt out' of religious services offered to them in Irish healthcare settings.
- Do not assume that the person, due to an absence of religious belief, will not want any personal support in times of illness or approaching death.
- Clarify with the person or the personal contact if there are any particular requirements in relation to death.

## ***Family dynamics and decision making***

### **Essential Practice Point**

**3**

It is possible that family may not be aware of the absence of religious belief. The wishes of the person must be respected in these situations.

## ***Blood Transfusion and Organ Transplantation***

There are unlikely to be objections to these procedures.

## ***Cleaning and touching the body***

### **Essential Practice Point**

**4**

The normal washing and preparation procedure can be carried out.

## ***Postmortem requirements***

There is unlikely to be objection to postmortem.

## ***Religious Icons and Symbols***

Any items worn by the person are likely to be of a personal nature.

### **Essential Practice Point**

**5**

It is not appropriate to use icons from the Christian or other traditions in the mortuary.

## **Additional Notes on Maternity and Paediatric Care**

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### ***Initiation ritual***

#### **Essential Practice Point**

**6**

- There is no initiation ritual among these traditions and baptism of newborns in imminent danger of death is not appropriate.
- Accredited Humanist Association of Ireland celebrants can provide baby-naming services.

### ***Foetal, infant and child death***

- There are no particular requirements in relation to foetal death and stillbirth. The personal contact will advise of any particular needs.
- Washing can be conducted as for an adult.

### ***Memento of a deceased child***

There are no restrictions on giving a memento of a child.

## **Developing a Contact for People Without Religious Belief**

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The Humanist Association of Ireland can facilitate non-religious funeral ceremonies. Further information and contact details available at [www.humanism.ie](http://www.humanism.ie)

## Contributors

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Mr Brendan Sheeran, Chairperson, Humanist Association of Ireland provided information for this section and approved the finalised version.