Contemporary Features of Death: an Inquiry on 52 Mortuaries in Piedmont Hospitals

Abstract:

Nowadays about 80% of people die at hospital: because of this relevant social phenomenon, a wide research project has been carried out in 2009 by Piedmont Region and the Regional Agency for Health Services in Piedmont (AreSS) visiting all the 'farewell places' (mortuary chapels, morgues, rest rooms) in the hospitals of Piedmont (Italy). From May through October 2009 an interdisciplinary team, composed of architects, historians of death rites, forensic experts, health organizers and psychologists, has visited 52 health structures (49 hospitals, 2 retirement homes and the Town Morgue in Turin). The research team has observed architecture features of the morgues, job profile and continuing education of the assigned staff, procedures of corpse handling, quality and style of reception of dead relatives. Features of hospital mortuary chapels seem to be quite alike all over the region: in the largest majority of cases, areas dedicated to death and dead are neglected, shabby, and sometimes dirty. Coffin exit ways are often nearby the waste depositories. The decay of architecture features is strictly related to the low job profile and to lack of continuing education of the staff, which appear to be deeply affected by the so called 'burn out' syndrome. The research has payed great attention to psychological effects and to sensory perceptions determined on permanent staff and on the attending people by staying in those areas. A colour code map of the results of the research under a psychological-perceptive standpoint has been subsequently drawn. Next objective of the research will be now to establish guidelines on a regional basis both for planning new architectural projects of the areas dedicated to farewell, aiming a respectful reception of the dead and of their relatives, and to realize an effective continuing education programme for all the staff involved in dead handling and reception. Main goal will be to shape an interactive, symbolic and emotionally involving atmosphere in the mortuary chapels, able to leave good long-lasting memories: a globally 'empathic' new identity of the farewell moment in order to appreciate the true value of lifetime.

Keywords: *death, mortuary chapels, Piemont.*