



## Front Office

by William D. Frye, Ph.D., CHE

# How to properly respond to a guest death in your hotel

*Another great article from The Rooms Chronicle®, the #1 journal for hotel rooms management! \*\*\*Important notice: This article may not be reproduced without permission of the publisher or the author.\*\*\* College of Hospitality and Tourism Management, Niagara University, P.O. Box 2036, Niagara University, NY 14109-2036. Phone: 866-Read TRC. E-mail: editor@roomschronicle.com*

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At some point in time, every front desk, security, or housekeeping manager will have to deal with the issue of death in their hotel. It is not a pleasant scenario when a guest is found dead, but it is a situation that requires immediate action, tact, and most importantly, discretion. Knowing the appropriate steps to take ahead of time can make dealing with this easier and enable the hotel and its staff to return to some semblance of normalcy quicker.

Not counting death resulting from criminal activity, guest deaths will typically fall into one of two categories: those resulting from natural causes or illness and those resulting from suicide. Unfortunately, the manner and categorization of a guest's death will determine what actions a hotelier must take to preserve the scene for authorities, safeguard the guest's personal property, and coordinate a removal and clean-up strategy that does not call undue attention to the situation while maintaining the hotel's reputation.

### Death from natural causes or illness

Death resulting from natural causes or illness that occur on hotel premises are typically much easier to handle than those that occur as a result of a suicide. The place where the body is found is generally not considered a crime scene and usually does not warrant intensive investigation by civil authorities. However, it is imperative to remember that it is not the hotel's responsibility to determine a cause or the nature of a guest's death; leave that to the police and coroner. The hotel's responsibility in this situation is pretty straightforward.

Whether it is a housekeeper, security officer, or hotel manager who discovers a potentially deceased victim, the first responsibility must always be to check the body to determine that the guest is actually dead and not merely asleep, suffering a stroke or heart attack, or has lapsed into a state of unconsciousness. Shake the guest and check for a pulse and listen for breathing. Absent these vital signs, notify the hotel switchboard or front desk using a land-line telephone or cell phone. Do not use a two-way radio or walkie-talkie as news of the death will be broadcast over the entire hotel communications network. The front desk or switchboard will notify the police and the hotel's security department. Remember, the guest is dead, speed is not necessarily of the essence here, but discretion is. It is imperative to share word of a guest's death only to those individuals who need to respond or notify the authorities.

The next step is to exit and secure the guestroom or immediate area. This means leaving the guestroom, locking the door, and awaiting the arrival of hotel management and the police. To preserve the area for investigation and to secure the decedent's valuables, it is critical that no single employee be left alone in the area where the death occurred. Once Management arrives, the employee who discovered the body should explain how and when they found the body, what steps they undertook to ascertain the guest was no longer alive, anything else they noticed, and what items in the guestroom or general area they touched.

Have a manager escort the employee to a secure location and wait with them to gather their composure and await questioning by police. Have a front desk agent or security officer stationed in the lobby to meet responding police and escort them to the location of the guest's body. No employee or manager should re-enter the guestroom or area of the body until police arrive, unless there is sufficient reason to believe that an unattended baby or child is still located in the room. At this point it is the hotel's primary responsibility to secure the location. Note that in some

### Think about it...

Other than the Luxor, a pyramid-shaped hotel in Las Vegas, how many atrium-style casino hotels can you name?

One reason why there are so few? Gambling losses can make some guests despondent and more prone to consider suicide by jumping.

states it is unlawful for any person to search for or remove the personal effects, money, papers, or property of a deceased person prior to the arrival of and until securing the permission of the coroner.

Once the police arrive, give them access to the scene and provide them the guest's registration card and payment information from the front desk. Hopefully, this will enable the authorities to contact the decedent's next of kin. Have Engineering remove from general service one elevator for exclusive use by police and the coroner. This elevator should be large enough to accommodate a stretcher so the body may be removed from the hotel.

With the assistance of the police, hotel security should inventory all personal items of the decedent found in the guestroom. If the authorities remove the decedent's property, request that the hotel be issued a receipt for all items removed. This will protect the hotel from potential theft claims levied by the decedent's next of kin.

If the police or coroner does not remove the guest's personal property, it is the hotel's responsibility to do so and safeguard it. Do not remove the decedent's property until the police or coroner approve. Once approval is granted, safeguard all of the decedent's property until it can be returned to the person authorized to receive it. This would normally be the duly appointed executor or administrator of the decedent's estate. Items of high value should be placed in a safe or safe deposit box.

Before delivering the decedent's property to any person, the hotel should request a certificate from the Surrogate's Court certifying that an executor or administrator of the decedent's estate has been appointed. To avoid incurring any liability, the hotel must only deliver the decedent's property to this authorized person. The hotel should retain a copy of the certificate and obtain a detailed receipt when delivering the property. Finally, to avoid the hotel from incurring state estate tax, prior to delivering a decedent's property the hotel should obtain a tax waiver from the state taxation authorities, even if the deceased guest was a non-resident of the state the hotel is located.

### **Death from suicide**

It is an unfortunate fact that many individuals who opt to commit suicide choose a hotel as the setting for their life-ending action. The propensity for suicides in hotels is derived from many factors. High-rise hotels with atrium-style lobbies, guestrooms with windows that open, and hotel balconies make a lodging property an inviting venue for those who choose to jump to their death. It's quick, it's painless, and someone else will have to clean up the mess.

For guests that choose less messy means of suicide, such as drug or sleeping pill overdose, or self-arranged strangulation, the appeal is that it is quiet, clean, and someone other than the deceased guest's family or friends will find the body and be forced to deal with the situation. Undoubtedly, potential suicide victims rationalize that this will reduce the trauma experienced by their loved ones.

From an operations perspective, the hotel response when finding a suicide victim is only slightly different than when coming upon a guest who has passed away due to natural causes or illness. The first priority is to ascertain the guest has expired with no hope of resuscitation. If revival is a possibility, contact the front desk or switchboard using the most expedient means and have them call 9-1-1 or the police/emergency response authorities immediately. Engage in CPR or appropriate first aid measures until emergency services arrive.

If it appears that the guest has been expired for a considerable time and you are certain that revival is impossible, do not remain in the guestroom or area. After notifying the front desk or switchboard on the guestroom phone exit and lock down the guestroom or secure the general area. Await the arrival of hotel management and the police. Follow the same procedures as described above for death from natural causes or illness.

### **Three unique problems to consider**

There are three unique aspects that hotels must consider when dealing with situations where guests have committed suicide on property. The first is the "crime scene" aspect. As committing suicide is essentially a crime in all states, the location where the body is found must remain unadulterated to the extent possible so that the police may conduct a proper investigation. If the police and/or coroner determine that the guest's death is actually a result of unassisted suicide, then there is no person alive to prosecute and the investigation ends promptly. But if they determine that the guest was assisted by a second party in their suicide, or perhaps the authorities believe that the guest was the unwilling victim of a criminal act but the scene was arranged to appear as if the guest took their own life, an uncontaminated crime scene will assist the police in furthering their investigation. Therefore, it is critically important that hotel employees who arrive upon a possible suicide or crime location do not touch any aspect of the scene unless absolutely necessary to save the life of the victim.

The second unique aspect is the "gore factor", especially if a guest commits suicide in a public area of the hotel. Think of a guest jumping from a balcony and landing in the atrium-style lobby or on the hotel's sidewalk and I am sure you understand what I mean. It will be messy and guests will be sickened if they witness the impact or see the impact site. When this happens the hotel must respond immediately to ascertain the guest has expired and to cover over the impact site until the police arrive. Very large dark-colored tarps made of impermeable material should be readily available to cover over the scene in the event this situation arises. Immediately cordon off the area and redirect all traffic away from the location. Do not allow any person into the area until the police or coroner clears the site. Keep all guests, media, and non-responding employees as far away from the scene as possible. This is where Management and security must uphold the utmost discretion in order to maintain some semblance of dignity for the decedent, the decedent's family, and the reputation of the hotel.

The final unique aspect when dealing with suicides (and violent crimes) that occur on property is the “public relations” aspect. Not surprisingly, most people are put off by the thought of suicide or violent crimes occurring. Few would want to stay in a hotel where they knew a suicide or violent crime had occurred. And even fewer would want to stay in the same guestroom where such an incident had played out. This is why controlling the scene post-incident and restricting access and the flow of negative information is critical. Details should only be shared with those who have a legitimate need to know, not with everyone who just wants to know what happened.

In any location where a messy death occurred, the hotel will need to sanitize the area. For a guestroom, this will typically involve placing the guestroom out-of-order and replacing all soft goods in the room, including the mattress, linens and perhaps carpeting and draperies. Case goods and hard surfaces will need to be thoroughly disinfected. This procedure may be more psychological than sanitary in nature, but the hotel has to be able to defend that it took appropriate actions to cleanse a death site before returning it to use by the general public. For deaths that occur in a public area of the hotel, close down that wing or area and redirect traffic away from the location until the area has been sanitized. ✧

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