

Resomator offers a greener way to go

By Don Butler, Ottawa Citizen, March 5, 2010

OTTAWA — It's a greener way to deal with death.

It's the "resomator," a giant metal contraption that uses a patented process known as resomation to reduce a human body to white powder and a goopy coffee-coloured liquid in just three hours.

The process is being marketed as "bio-cremation" — a "more meaningful term for consumers," says Allen Bessel, president of Transition Science Inc., which owns the Canadian rights to the technology.

It will become commercially available for the first time in the next few weeks at a Florida funeral home, but Ottawa could be the first place in this country to get it.

Bessel says bio-cremation has also attracted interest from funeral operators in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta and British Columbia, but he declined to identify them because discussions are in the early stages.

The Ottawa firm Hulse, Playfair & McGarry is finalizing an agreement with a partner in Gatineau, Que., to bring one of the devices to the region by fall at the latest, says Brian McGarry, the company's CEO.

"We're very anxious to be, if not No. 1, then soon No. 2 in the province," he says. "We may be ahead of Toronto for once in our lives."

That remains to be seen. A company that operates six cemeteries in the Toronto area, Park Lawn Income Trust, also hopes to have a resomator up and running this year, says Daniel Reid, Park Lawn's director of sales and marketing.

Bessel acknowledges there's "a bit of rivalry happening there, but I appreciate the spirit of that."

In the resomation process, a body in a sealed silk coffin is placed in a pressurized metal chamber filled with water and potassium hydroxide, which is then heated to about 180 degrees Celsius.

Within three hours, the alkaline solution dissolves soft body tissue and protein matter into a soup of amino acids and peptides that can be safely flushed down a drain.

All that's left are bone and teeth remains, which has been reduced to a fine white ash that can be placed in an urn and returned to loved ones.

"Unfortunately, there is no pretty way to go. We put (the liquid from a treated corpse) down the drain, yes. But there's no DNA, no protein, just chemicals. Nothing relating to a person at all,"

Sandy Sullivan, the 53-year-old British biochemist who founded Resomation Ltd., told the Times of London.

Unlike traditional cremation, which uses large amounts of energy and vents a variety of pollutants through a smokestack, bio-cremation is environmentally friendly, advocates contend.

According to some estimates, a typical cremation releases about 400 kilograms of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, along with pollutants such as dioxins and mercury vapour from silver tooth fillings, the Times of London reported.

In addition, a single cremation guzzles the same amount of energy needed for an 800-kilometre car journey, the British paper said. By contrast, Sullivan told the Times resomation's carbon footprint is four times lower than that of cremation.

McGarry, whose firm has a 10 per cent stake in Transition Science, agrees. "This is kind of the next chapter," he says. "There's actually no additional financial benefit to us, but we think there's a very strong environmental benefit to the community."

McGarry believes half or more of those families will choose bio-cremation once it's available here. "We find a lot of our clientele are very environmentally conscious now."

For his part, Bessel thinks the familiar funeral methods won't disappear any time soon. "Change takes time, and I think there's still a very viable market for traditional cremation and burial."

Hulse, Playfair & McGarry will offer bio-cremation for roughly the same price as a basic cremation, which typically costs about \$1,600. By contrast, an average funeral with burial costs more than \$5,000, not including the plot, which can add \$8,000 or more to the cost.

Regulatory approval from municipal and provincial authorities is needed, but Bessel says he's "comfortable that we're compliant with all of the funeral industry and ministry of the environment criteria."

The Quebec government, in particular, is keen on the idea, McGarry says, because several cities in the province have crematoria in their downtown districts.

"Quebec is really pushing," he says. "They're anxious to get folks started on resomation."

Bessel has also begun working with local authorities to make sure resomation meets their waste water treatment requirements.