

## Case Study: Tibetan Sky Burial and Public Health Concerns

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A doctor works in a hospital close to Tibet. Recently a 50-year-old Tibetan Buddhist was in the ICU with symptoms like that of a new virus making global headlines. After the man died, his wife asked to have the body so she could conduct the sky burial ritual, a funeral practice in which the corpse is dismembered and left for the natural elements to break down. This practice is viewed as a holy and generous way to dispose of remains. However, the local government has issued an order that any patient who has shown symptoms of the new disease prior to passing must be wrapped in cloth and placed in a casket to be immediately shut. Under no circumstances must the coffin be opened for risk of infection. If the ritual is conducted it will take place in a mountain range that houses a specific species of vulture who will consume the remains. The capacities of the virus are not yet known and the chance of anthroponosis (infection/disease transmissible from humans to animals) is unlikely but not impossible in the event the man is infected. The doctor must decide whether to record the man's death as caused by the new unknown disease or to record it as death due to something else which would allow the family to perform the ritual.

### Reflection:

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- What is at stake for the family in their request for a sky burial?
- Are there ways in which the doctor could both respect the needs of the family and the current public health risk?
- What factors should be taken into consideration when making a final decision?
- Do medical professionals have an obligation to adhere to patient requests? If so, are there boundaries to that obligation?
- What impact could the doctor's decision have on the community?

### Additional Resources:

Bush, Rose. "Vultures of Tibet: Sky Burial Tourism Threatens a Tibetan Buddhist Ritual". Youtube, Uploaded by Aeon Video, 12 Mar. 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=240\\_5W\\_0GGg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=240_5W_0GGg).

Sung, Kham. "Sky Burial in Tibet, Tibetan Funeral Customs." Tibet Travel and Tours, Tibet Vista, 5 Nov. 2020, <https://www.tibettravel.org/tibetan-local-customs/tibetan-funeral.html>.