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‘Having her body at home let me grieve’

When Ilse Fieldsend's daughter Georgia died, the family took her home for 11 days. She tells *Antonia Hoyle* how it helped

Ilse Fieldsend held her three-year-old daughter's hand as they lay together on the little girl's bed. Georgia's blonde hair was freshly washed, her tiny frame encased in her favourite pink dress, her feet adorned with her beloved sparkly purple shoes.

"I stroked Georgia's forehead and told her how much I loved her," recalls

Ilse. "I was a wreck, and often left her room to cry, but I still savoured every moment I had her next to me."

A fortnight earlier, Georgia had suffered a sudden and fatal brain aneurism. After turning off her life-support machine, Ilse and her husband James made the unusual decision to take their daughter's body back to their Surrey home, where she remained for 11 days, until her funeral. In that time, Georgia's skin grew

colder and her complexion paler. But her presence offered her parents comfort, as well as a cruel reminder of their loss.

"I know some will think what we did was shocking, but to us it made sense," says Ilse, 42, a party planner. "Our daughter's body belonged with us, not in a morgue. Having her at home helped us to grieve."

In an age of oversharing, death remains taboo; the one subject we would do anything to avoid discussing. Yet it has been brought into sharp focus this week with the story of Russell Davison, who kept his wife Wendy's body at home for six days after she died of cervical cancer this April. Russell, 50, described the process as an "emotional decompression chamber", giving family and friends the chance to come to terms with their loss while Wendy, also 50, was still physically present.

According to Dying Matters – an organisation set up to help us talk more openly about death and currently marking its Awareness Week – it is only in recent decades that we have become so squeamish about dead bodies.

"One hundred years ago, 85 per cent of us died at home and bodies would remain in the house with the family until the funeral," says spokesman Simon Chapman. "But after the growth of the NHS and the explosion in medical technology, people started to die in hospital and death was no longer part of the community."

Yet taking a loved one's body home can prove cathartic, he says: "Being able to spend time with their physical

Ilse Fieldsend, above, with Georgia, who died at the age of three, and son Joshua, and with husband James, below

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remains can help. To say goodbye is important."

A lively, loving and seemingly healthy little girl, Georgia had collapsed in her mother's arms on the beach in December 2013, while Ilse and James, 41, a barrister, were on holiday in Egypt with her younger brother Joshua, then two. She was rushed to the local hospital before being airlifted to King's College Hospital, London, still on life support. "We knew in our hearts she was gone, but we still hoped there was a chance," says Ilse.

But at 1am the following morning, December 27, she was pronounced dead. Tests would later show Georgia had an aneurysm – a rare, blood-filled bulge in a blood vessel that usually shows no symptoms until it bursts – which had ruptured in her brain.

In the five hours they had before her life-support machine was turned off, Ilse and James made the brave decision to donate their daughter's liver, kidney, heart valves and eyes, which have subsequently saved four lives and the sight of two young men.

"It was awful, but we knew that if something happened to Joshua we would want him to be offered donated organs," says Ilse. "Before she went into theatre for their removal, we cuddled Georgia and said: 'You go do your bit.' She would have wanted to help."

Following the operation, Georgia's body was taken to the hospital morgue. "I was frightened of seeing her there," says Ilse. "I thought it

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