

By Frank Mastropolo June 16 - "When a loved one dies, few people want to shop around for the best price on the casket. That's why many people simply accept the price quoted by their funeral director.

And that's also why many people end up paying too much for a casket. To address the need to hold down funeral costs, over 300 retail casket stores have sprung up across the country. Consumers say they can save thousands of dollars on the price of a casket when buying from these stores. Customers choose the casket at the store, which then ships the casket to the funeral home.

Federal law allows third-party casket sales; in fact, funeral homes are required to accept delivery of third-party caskets and not charge extra for their use. But in several states, only licensed funeral directors are permitted to sell caskets, and retail casket stores have been forced to close their doors. Those who violate the law risk fines and imprisonment.

In Meridian, Miss., casket store owner Ricky Dancy learned the hard way that funeral directors in his state enjoy a monopoly on casket sales. Dancy was arrested after a funeral director complained that Dancy sold a casket to Mary Anderson, whose son had died. Anderson told 20/20 that she saved \$2,000 - half the price of a comparable casket she was shown at the funeral home - by shopping at Dancy's casket store.

Later this year, a federal court may consider whether it is constitutional for Mississippi to require that only funeral directors sell caskets at the time of death. Dancy's case will be considered after the constitutionality of the state law is decided.

Casket store owners say that obtaining a funeral director's license is an unnecessary burden because all they are doing is selling caskets. They are not handling the body or conducting funerals. The funeral industry stresses that it offers caring and compassionate service, while casket stores are only concerned with selling caskets. John Carmon, speaking for a funeral directors' association, told 20/20 that funeral directors can meet or beat the prices offered by casket stores.

Casket sales provide a big part of the profit in a funeral service. John Stossel, in his "Give Me A Break!" segment, asks why these states have created a cozy monopoly on casket sales for funeral directors.

Instead of protecting the profits of the funeral industry, shouldn't the politicians be looking out for the consumer? When it comes to money, they say you can't take it with you, but must funeral directors get so much of what's left?"