Taunton & District Branch of Cruse

by PIPPA ALSOP

Branch Chairman

My first introduction to the work of Cruse was in 1982 when I was working in the Bristol area as a Medical Social Worker. Most of my work concerned the terminally ill and bereavement in their families afterwards.

I came to Somerset in June, 1982 to be Principal Social Worker to the West Somerset Group of Hospitals. Soon after that one of my social work colleagues approached me to say that he and a group of other professionals and bereaved had long been talking about the prospect of setting up a Branch of Cruse in West Somerset.

As bereavement work has had such an impact on my professional and personal life I was very pleased to offer my help. From those original discussions, my colleague Paul Besley, who has been one of the prime motivators behind the Taunton & District Branch, organised a meeting with Patricia Rawlingson Plant, the South West Area Organiser of Cruse who was able to give us a lot of suggestions about how to set a Branch up.

From the initial stirrings of interest we realised that a huge task lay ahead of us. My involvement in helping to set up voluntary organisations previously had been on a much less formal basis than the way in which it is suggested that a Cruse Branch is set up. The back up of the national organisation, the Area Organiser and the firm guidelines of Cruse House seem to be such a luxury which many voluntary organisations do not enjoy.

Shortly after one of the first exploratory meetings I was suddenly ill and disappeared from the scene for three months. When I returned I found that although people in Taunton and District had waited 23 years before embarking on setting up a Cruse Branch things had moved on at a great pace.

An Exploratory Meeting had been held in the October when local voluntary organisations, professionals and lay people were alerted to the project of setting up a Branch of Cruse. The support and collaboration between voluntary and statutory agencies in West Somerset is very impressive and this was a great asset in our early days. One voluntary organisation, Council for Voluntary Service, was able to provide us with our Treasurer. The Exploratory Meeting had been well attended and from there a Steering Committee was formed. It seemed on the whole that we were able to recruit the right people who were committed to the cause.

By the time I returned a Counselling Course was in the process of being run and a Social Sub-Committee had been formed. The main gap was the need for a Chairman and an Organising Secretary. The search for a suitable Organising Secretary continued to be a tremendous problem until six weeks before the Inaugural Meeting.



Shortly after my return to work I was approached about becoming Chairman to the Steering Committee, a role I felt privileged to be asked to take on but one which promised to be extremely time-consuming.

By the time I became Chairman, the Steering Committee was at the point of deciding on its aims and objectives. We began by looking at the geographical area which we would hope to cover. Somerset is a very rural community, interspersed with large towns. The Yeovil and Sherborne Branch were involved in deciding our catchment area, since we were concerned not to overlap, but we did hope to cover the rest of the county that they were not able to cover. We decided to concentrate our efforts on Taunton and the surrounding villages. We planned to expand in the other towns once we had got the foundations for a strong Branch in Taunton. We had the task of publicising the Branch and keeping people from the smaller towns interested until we could reach a point where they could form their own sub-groups.

The Steering Committee's other decision was whether to offer a total service to all bereaved. We were all agreed that this should be one of our aims, particularly as quite a few parents who had lost children had stated their support and interest.

By August, 1983 we had planned our Inaugural Meeting for September and were interviewing and selecting counsellors. This was a difficult task and I am still not convinced that we had our selection procedure worked out properly. A number of very keen people put themselves forward for counselling and some we considered to be unsuitable. Their response to not being selected caused them a lot of upset, and I found that we were having to counsel those people. Some of them have stayed to help the Branch in many ways, others became very upset and left under a cloud. This experience led us to rethinking our selection procedure and we have just recently run another course and selected other counsellors. This time it seemed to be a much less painful experience.

The Counselling Sub-Committee had encountered various problems and perhaps these had to do with some individuals who may not have been on the Committee for the right reasons. Gradually these people dropped out.

As we headed towards the Inaugural Meeting there was also a lot of anxiety among the six counsellors we had selected as to what would be expected of them following the Inaugural Meeting. Again reassurance was required and through the Area Organiser we were able to draw on the experience of other Cruse Branches in the South West.

After the Inaugural Meeting a steady trickle of referrals came in and these have been sustained ever since. Coffee mornings are held fortnightly with counsellors in attendance and these, too, are a great success. Our counsellors' enthusiasm and diligence is worth emphasising. They have formed particular friendships with each

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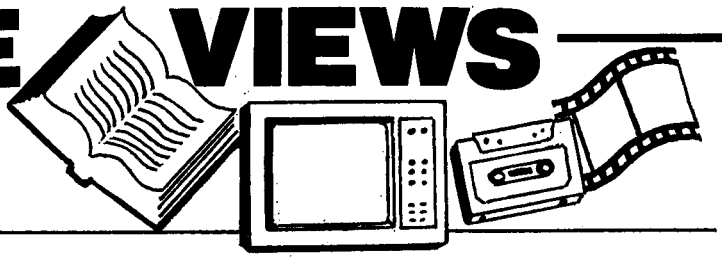
other and also with members of the social group. This helps to make the Branch more cohesive. At times as Chairman I have to temper the frustration of the Social Sub-Committee. They feel that members should help more in organising activities. I feel this is characteristic of what bereavement does to people. For many there is a wide gulf between being helped and helping and it takes a long time to build the bridge.

It would be wrong of me to suggest that our flourishing Branch has not been thwarted with problems. Our major one concerns the continuity of officers and recruiting the right people have also had difficulties in responding to referrals outside the immediate town of Taunton. Our initial aim of setting up sub-groups is now beginning to work and we are hoping to run counselling courses in other towns which should alleviate this problem.

Several widowers have been seen by two female counsellors, since our only male counsellor unfortunately suffered a stroke soon after the branch opened. We are in the process of setting up a small group for our men, and hope at some point to channel them into the more predominant female social group. Money is a constant worry for us and most of our funds, which are looking quite healthy currently, have been raised by Branch initiative. A small grant has recently been obtained from the local authority. One of the lessons we learnt is about the difficulty of finding and keeping appropriate people for some of the positions in a Cruse branch.

Although I feel we are doing well as a branch we must not become complacent. A constant task is to keep people motivated and sustain them through periods of doubt and lack of confidence. Our main aims for the future are strengthening and developing sub-groups, and we would like to provide a 'drop-in' centre but as yet have not found suitable premises. We would like to be able to pay an Organising Secretary since we are well aware of the amount of time that our Secretary gives to Cruse. We need to publicise ourselves more, recognising that publicity is the only way that people will be made more aware of the needs of the bereaved. We also need to work constantly at continuing to recruit the right people to our organisation who have a variety of expertise in different areas.

REVIEWS



LIVING WITH DEATH and DYING

E. Kubler-Ross. Souvenir. 1982. £7.95 & £5.95.

This is a hotch potch of essays edited by a pioneer in the understanding of communications of dying children and adults. Much the best thing in it is the initial chapter—largely case studies of dying and bereaved children illustrating Kubler-Ross's inimitable rapport with her patients and her efforts to help them to come to grips with death and dying. Her analogy of the body as a cocoon and of death as liberating the butterfly soul which flies out of our sight but "then only begin(s) to enjoy the flowers and the sunshine", is both poignant and effective—with true humility she recounts her mistakes as well as her successes. This chapter cannot fail to be of use to all hospital and other professional staff working with terminal patients.

The rest of the book I found disappointing. Furth's "explanation" of children's drawings is too tense and owes too much to Jungian theory to be accessible to "lay" readers and his conclusion that the interpreter of children's drawings needs a psychoanalytic training makes it difficult to understand to whom this chapter is addressed.

Finally half the book is taken up with a repetitive account of the death of a child by her mother; writing which doubtless helped the bereaved parent but which will be of little help to others. It badly needed good editing. An English reader cannot but be struck once more, reading this book, by the worry about money which preoccupies all but the wealthiest Americans when illness strikes, and which makes me grateful for a health service which relieves families in crisis of one major anxiety.

In conclusion I think time would better be spent re-reading Kubler-Ross's earlier masterpiece "On Death and Dying".

DORA BLACK

This review first appeared in the Newsletter of the Association of Child Psychology & Psychiatry.

CICELY SAUNDERS: THE FOUNDER OF THE MODERN HOSPICE MOVEMENT

Shirley du Boulay. Hodder & Stoughton. 1984. £10.95 hardback, £7.95 paper back.

'I only want what is in your mind and in your heart' were the words spoken to almoner Cicely Saunders by David Tasma as he lay dying in St. Thomas's Hospital. Thirteen years later she was to sit, this time as Doctor, beside the bed of another dying man Antoni and say to him 'Please believe me, it isn't just I who have given, but you who have given me, and I am grateful'. In the years between these two deeply felt experiences Cicely Saunders had laid down the foundations of the community that was to become St. Christopher's Hospice.

Few people could have been so equipped to respond to that initial request as Cicely Saunders. In her mind she contained the experience of her work as a nurse and an almoner and she was to become a doctor. From her heart she drew upon her deep religious belief and a passionate intensity of feeling which was to be directed towards the realisation of her vision of an unique establishment that would promote research into the care and treatment of the dying, encourage the teaching and training of doctors and nurses and would provide care not only in the hospice itself but also in the homes of the terminally ill.

St. Christopher's was Cicely Saunders 'child' and Shirley du Boulay's skilfully constructed book explores, through her subject's life, the events leading up to its conception, its struggle for birth and the inter-relationship between it and its 'life giver' up to the present time.

The book is, I feel, a fitting tribute to a remarkable woman. Just as Cicely Saunders has the gift of being able to draw upon the resources of those working around her to establish her vision, so the author has used the words of friends, colleagues (sometimes critical) and patients to re-enforce her research. We too are given access to the mind and heart of Cicely Saunders—the restrictions of her childhood, the importance that religion was to play in her life and her own struggle to come to terms with the losses and bereavements in her personal life.

She is an inspired teacher and the book offers us many examples of her advice, like that given on fund-raising: 'Never miss an opportunity to tell the tale, never stop saying thank you'; or in response to a consultant commenting that she, unlike him, had time to spare for her patients: 'Oh no, Doctor, time isn't a question of length, it's a question of depth, isn't it?'

The supporting characters of the book, those who have known Cicely Saunders and work in the field of bereavement provide fascinating food for thought. Dr. Fulton offers an explanation for the important part that women have played—the three major world prizes for work with the dying have all gone to women—Mother Teresa, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and Cicely Saunders.

The chapter containing Ramsey's Diary is deeply moving. As a patient of St. Christophers, dying of a brain tumour' he was able to write 'I hope that I might live for a little while yet and enjoy being a man who can find something new that he's never found before'.

Cicely Saunders' single-minded dedication has ensured that many thousands of people across the world now have the opportunity to face their death in so positive a manner.

SUSAN WALLBANK
Counsellor, Cruse House

WOMEN AND TRANQUILLISERS

Celia Haddon. Sheldon Press. 1984. £3.95

Celia Haddon has written, in a brisk journalistic style, a handbook for those wanting to overcome their dependence on tranquillisers. As the title tells us, this is mainly a women's problem with twice as many women as men caught in the trap. Tranquilliser dependence, along with bereavement, has become a fashionable subject, and that these will sometimes overlap makes the book of interest to Cruse members and helpers.