BEREAVEMENT AND THE UNMARRIED PARTNER

There is nothing gay about bereavement and it is to be hoped that this paper will do something to remedy the indifference and lack of care which is experienced by homosexuals of either sex when they suffer the loss of a loved partner. Editor.

by Dudley Cave

It seems certain that about 5% of the population is homosexual. Some will 'play the field' but most will settle into relationships which are as stable as are most marriages. As with mixed couples, they may be monogamous or open and may be for life or a shorter period. There will not often be children but some couples will be caring for children from previous marriages or, very occasionally, from a donor pregnancy.

The death of the one will leave the other as bereft as any widow or widower and there are problems, not experienced by those bereaved by the death of a husband or wife.

There is lack of recognition. Many such relationships are discreet or even secret. The couple pass as flatmates or 'just good friends' and, even when neighbours have guessed, even had a quiet giggle about them, they will not respond to the loss as they would for a husband or wife. They will not write those little notes which mean so much or offer to help. One bereaved man said the only response from neighbours to the death of his partner was an inquiry if the vacant room was to let.

The funeral service, which is ordinarily so important for grief work, can be a disaster. Often the blood relatives will have made the arrangements and the bereaved partner may be excluded from the service altogether or, if attending, may be left to sit at the back, shrouded in his or her personal grief, away from the expressions of sympathy directed to the chief mourners at the front.

Even when the bereaved partner is treated as chief mourner, there can be problems. Some ministers of religion have negative feelings about homosexual love and may express these in the funeral. This can be openly as in prayers that the deceased may be forgiven the deviant life-style, or by ignoring the partner, not mentioning her or his name in the service, or by coolness after the service.

All too often, same-sex couples fail to make valid wills and bereaved partners may suffer a further loss when they have to move out of the shared home. Frequently tenancies or leases are in one partner's name and the survivor has no rights to remain. Only a few enlightened councils will accept that same-sex survivors have the same rights as widows or widowers.

The Gay Bereavement Project is a London-based registered charity concerned with all problems which lesbians and gay men meet in bereavement. It is a small group of men and women, in equal numbers, who are all comfortable with their own gayness and are suitably trained in bereavement work.



Gay women and men must make wills and should name their partner as the executor

GAY BEREAVEMENT PROJECT

The very recently bereaved should contact Gay switchboard on 01-837 7324

Contact with volunteers is by letter or by telephone. Callers who ring London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (01-837 7324) will be given the name and number of a volunteer who will be on duty that evening by the phone at home. There is no way of matching clients and counsellors, but callers can be referred to other members who may have particular expertise or to outside agencies, such as Gay Legal Advice, or Friend.

As well as the usual training given to bereavement volunteers, Project members are taught how to listen, and be heard to listen, on the phone—the construct've use of grunts and the encouraging 'ummms'.

As well as mopping up spilt milk, the Project encourages gay women and men to prepare for the inevitable day when one will die: to arrange for joint ownership and to write wills. Too few realise that, without a valid will, a same-sex partner cannot inherit and all will go to blood relatives or to the state. They have published a will form which they will send free to anyone for an SAE.

They also work to educate the caring professions to the existence of gay bereavement, and to help people who care to recognise it. To this end they will send out a pair of speakers to any group which will pay fares and, if necessary, provide overnight accommodation. For bereavement projects and for social work students they will lead seminars or training sessions. For general interest groups they offer a light-hearted look at a serious subject 'Where there's a Will there's a Relative'.

It is a shoe-string organisation, funded almost entirely by contributions from gay organisations. It has no paid staff, and its offices are under the stairs of the home of two of its key workers.

Forthcoming conferences

COMING HOME. Meeting Mental Health Needs Locally.

An international conference will be held at the School of Pharmacy, University of London, on 15th, 16th and 17th September, 1986. "Reaching vulnerable people" will be the theme of the second day.

Further information from NE Thames Regional Health Authority, 01-262 8011.

Changes

Foundation for the Study of Infant Death has moved to 15 Belgrave Square, London SW1Y 8PS. Tel: 01-235 0965/1721.

National Council for Carers & their Elderly Dependants, 29 Chilworth Mews, London W2 3RG. New Tel: 01-724 7776.

Centre for Policy on Ageing

CPA's new offices are at 25-31 Ironmonger Row, London EC1V 3QP. Tel. 01-253 1787. They point out that their nearest underground station is Old Street.