EDITORIAL

In this day of financial accountability, those who are attempting to provide service to the bereaved are often asked to justify themselves. How do you know that the service you are providing achieves its aims? What is the benefit of the service in relation to its cost?

If we were selling toothpaste it might be easy to answer these questions. Sales figures and profits to shareholders would soon tell us whether the product was selling, and these would soon drop if it failed to clean teeth. When the 'product' is something as complex and emotionally charged as support to the bereaved, the answers are less easy.

Bereavement Care is committed to publish information about all worthwhile evaluations of bereavement services, but the Editors have no illusions about the difficulty and expense of carrying out such studies. We know of no simple tests that can be built into the routine information-gathering of bereavement services that will enable them to evaluate themselves, and we strongly oppose 'window-dressing'. Gushing letters from satisfied customers are of little value, although complaints should be solicited and impartially investigated. Beyond this, the best assurance that people can have that a service is worthwhile is the esteem in which it and the people who run it are held by their clients and colleagues.

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Viewing the bodies following disaster: Does it help?



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Deaths which are sudden, violent, untimely or in horrifying circumstances, such as in disasters, are known to cause problematic grieving[1]. It has been suggested that the relatives of those who die in such tragic circumstances may be helped to grieve if they see the remains of the deceased[2,3].

GRIEVING AFTER A DISASTER

The circumstances of a death in a disaster will be particularly important to the bereaved. They will search for information about the cause of death so that they can work out how it occurred, or they will try to find out details about what was happening at the time, for example whether the loved one was attempting to rescue others, which might give some meaning to their loss.

Establishing certainty of death

Viewing the body of the deceased, which in the first part of this century was a common custom, is an important part of accepting the 'certainty of death', especially in sudden, unexpected loss. Usually, natural disbelief after a death is gradually eroded by the reality of the absence of the deceased, and undeniable in the presence of a dead body. The transformation of the body, the pallid colour, coldness, unyielding texture, fixed limbs and immobility, provide incontrovertible evidence of death. Although in general a majority of people (73%) choose not to view the corpse of a loved one[4], there is usually a knowledge that someone, such as a relative, has actually done so.

In some bereavements by disaster, no body is recovered. In the absence of a body, this certainty of death, an absolute necessity for effective grieving to begin, may never be established. If the body is recovered, but not seen, this may in some circumstances lead to a failure to accept this certainty, and, in others, to a delay in doing so. For some, the sight of the body is an important image which establishes that the familiar, palpably-alive, physical presence of the person no longer exists in the real world and that memories are all that remain.

This will be particularly important in the absence of preparation for death. In the normal course of events, physical deterioration, heralding death, may have been

EDITOR'S NOTE

After death the facial muscles relax and this gives an appearance of peace, consequently many people look better dead than they did during the hours before death. This simple occurrence, plus the way in which viewing the body of a dead person helps to make real the fact of death, mean that it is usually thought to be a good idea to encourage people to view.

But what if the body is mutilated, and the last memories of the dead person have been of someone fit, healthy and happy? Is viewing likely to spoil that image?

In this article Peter Hodgkinson, author of *Coping with Catastrophe*[5], reviews the evidence and reports on his own experience as a member of a team who visited bereaved people after the Zeebrugge ferry disaster.