Professionals and non-professionals can make assumptions about each other which diminish the effectiveness of their roles in Cruse. Here, SUE JOSLIN, AIMSW, health district social worker supervisor with Surrey Social Services, chairman of North West Surrey Cruse and a member of the Cruse Training Committee explores the subject.

Courtesy of Surrey Comet



IT IS ALL TOO EASY TO GET CAUGHT up in the professional versus the non-professional dilemma. We cannot deny that there are differences but we all have an important motive in common. we have volunteered to help the widowed in one way or another. Our reasons for wanting to help may differ and need looking at when it comes to deciding what work we should undertake in the Branch. but that is a different issue. We all start from the same baseline, so what are the problems?

JARGON: Professional jargon, while being a useful shorthand to professionals can be daunting and inhibiting to those not in the know. Some professionals seem to have lost the ability to speak to one another in plain English whilst the non-professionals feel that the simplicity of their explanations is too uncomplicated to mean anything. The latter is. of course. nonsense. and I contend we can learn a lot about communication with widowed people by learning to be quite certain we understand one another first.

TRAINING: Professional training may be seen by non-professionals as giving unique and mysterious power and skill to the participant. It cannot do this. Either you have the skill or you do not. but what it can do is develop abilities you already have. give you additional knowledge or resources. and give you time to look thoroughly at your chosen career and your own attitudes. It also gives you credibility in the eyes of society and confidence in your own eyes and those of your colleagues. This does not mean that an untrained person cannot develop too. but this cannot happen in a vacuum and the skill and knowledge of the professional can be shared both to give appropriate briefing on the Branch's courses. and also to lend credence to the standards the Branch is setting. If a few letters after a name impress us. and if we are honest they do. then so too will they impress the local community in which your Branch is set up.

THE THREAT: While it may seem obvious that non-professionals may feel threatened by professionals. there is also a threat to the professionals of seeing a job being done by someone else as well as. or better than they could do it themselves. But does it matter who does the job provided the bereaved person gains in the end? One of the lessons one learns as a professional volunteer is humility. Sometimes in spite of my professionalism I am not the best person to counsel a particular widow or widower because the knowledge. skill and experience of one of the non-professional volunteers is more appropriate and more likely to give the help which is needed.

EXPERIENCE: In every Branch there will be volunteers who have not been widowed themselves and who face the criticism "You cannot possibly understand because you haven't been through it." I acknowledge the truth of this statement. but I would also like to add that you may not understand another person's grief precisely because you **have** been through it. You remember your own pain. distress and desolation so clearly that it is all too easy to lose sight of the other person's individual and different pain. distress and desolation. Professional care givers have usually to learn to handle this tendancy to over-identify during their training. and to recognise when it is happening and seek help.. and their experience can usefully be shared within a Branch.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Sometimes there is a feeling amongst professionals that they are the only ones who keep a code of confidentiality. We have found our professionals have been made to think very hard about their own code of confidentiality by the non-professionals. It is all too easy when working all the time with other professionals to become rather sloppy and take it for granted that you can talk freely to fellow worker as you think fit. Our non-professionals have asked direct and often searching questions about what we think we are doing. and this has been useful not only to the Branch. but also to many of us in our work. Sometimes a member of the Statutory Services has been reluctant to talk to a volunteer until they admit to being a professional as well. This has rather irritated us all but has also encouraged us to consider the question carefully. I feel it is up to each Branch to prove to local Services that confidentiality will be respected by any Cruse volunteer.

ASSESSMENT: We must remember that while not usually mentally sick or with extensive problems. bereaved people are very vulnerable and care is needed in assessing the situation and offering appropriate help. Certainly in the early stages of a Branch's life there is no dilemma. It is vital to have professionals involved, particularly on the counselling side because they are used to making this sort of assessment. I do not mean that every referral should be assessed by a professional. but the skill and experience the professional has should be used to discuss the problem and work out the wider implications of what took place in the first and subsequent interviews.

(continued on page 23)

POSTBAG

Please write to us. We welcome the views of all CRUSE workers and also our other readers

From Margaret H. Nuttall, teacher at Claybourne ESN School. Addlestone. Surrey.

Following the reference in Bereavement Care (Vol. 1. No. 2) discussing increasing interest of schools in death and bereavement. readers might be interested to know some of the results of my long study. done in connection with a recent diploma course in Special Education. I was looking at the death of a child and the schools response. I visited both special and mainstream schools and used a questionnaire as a basis for discussion. Several important points emerged.

My survey showed that it is wise for a school to discuss the issue of the possibility of a child's death and have a clear policy as to how they would respond. Many special schools. particularly those caring for the physically handicapped and severely subnormal have to face the possibility of the death of a pupil. and some schools had given the subject much thought and had clear policies.* However. child death. though rare. could strike at any time in any type of school and the schools who had no policy could handle a sensitive situation clumsily and give rise to problems which could have been avoided by preparation.

The head is the person best placed to initiate discussion and should accept this responsibility. However. if he is reluctant or does not show an awareness of the need to face the topic. any member of staff. educational psychologist. welfare worker. school nurse. who feels the area to be neglected should have the confidence to raise it with the head and ask for discussion.

Several of the questions dealt with coping with the dying child and showed that a teacher can have unique opportunities to help. She has close contact with the children and her detachment from physical care make it possible to support emotional needs. Opportunities to think and talk about death and loss may save hours of worry and allay fears. A teacher should not be afraid to let children voice their questions and answer as honestly as the situation allows. and to be sensitive to what lies behind the question. The terminally ill child avoids asking questions of their parents. as it is too emotional for both parties. If the teacher does not help. who will?

Teachers thought that dying children should be treated as far as possible as though they were healthy, making allowances for physical restrictions and impaired performance that can accompany the closing stages of some conditions. Some consider this inhuman and that the child should have a special curriculum or be taken out of school altogether. Schools may be the only degree of normality in his life and if he feels singled out in a negative way this may make him more anxious about the seriousness of his condition. The way death is dealt with in school provides models of behaviour that can help or hinder children in the future and in other losses they will experience. Death in childhood, children's understanding of death and the bereaved child should all be included in teacher training. No teacher should be left to cope with a bereavement on her own. Support from the head and colleagues is essential.

*** Out of seventeen questionnaires returned only six had a planned policy. Eleven said they had discussed the issue and five said that they would wait until a death occurred before deciding upon what to do. One head replied that death would never be discussed in her school.**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 18

SUPERVISION: Similarly I believe that at first in a Branch's life it is vital to have experienced professionals supervising the counsellors. Supervision in this context does not mean overseeing. but the process through which support. guidance and increasing knowledge are gained by all workers. Supervision is skilled work and the volunteers (professional and non-professional) must have confidence that the supervisor has the skill to assess not only the needs of the bereaved but also the volunteer's abilities so that he is not left unsupported in a situation he feels he does not understand and cannot cope with.

CONCLUSION: One of our non-professional counsellors told us at a counsellors/supervisors meeting once that the widow she was visiting had tried to keep her at the end of her interview by making her a cup of tea. A useful discussion by the group on manipulation followed. after which the counsellor told us how she had solved the problem at the next interview. When she arrived she had flung herself into a chair saying she had had a very exhausting day; she was immediately offered a cup of tea. As a result the widow felt useful and caring. the counsellor kept to a reasonable time limit. our discussion on manipulation had been valuable to professionals and non-professionals alike. and many of us wished we had thought of this delightfully simple way of solving the problem.

So. although I am certain of the need for professionals in a Branch. I also see a great need for non-professional for in the very act of learning to listen to one another. sharing our knowledge and experience. strengths and weaknesses. so we all develop humility. become more self-aware. adaptable and flexible and produce a more exciting mix of appropriate help for the bereaved.

SUE JOSLIN