Session 9
"THE CARING COMMUNITY: voluntary and statutory help for those suffering grief" by a Cruse member.
Session 10
GENERAL DISCUSSION, by a team of above contributors.

Counselling

In Glasgow it is our experience that most people who seek help with grief need befriending rather than counselling, but we know the counselling process to be an effective way of helping people to deal with emotionally-based behavioural problems and difficulties. We select people for training, **not** for counselling. We look for a suitable personality, the ability to deal with own grief experience, a non-directive, non-dominant person, a willingness for volunteers to risk a little of themselves in helping others, the likelihood of their not being emotionally hurt while counselling, and the ability to work in groups. Training consists of one course where the principles of counselling and practical skills are taught, followed by a second part learning about the bereavement process and the resources needed for counselling.

With this basic background counsellors can achieve surprising results. All our counsellors can claim to have had successful cases. Measurement of success is important and necessary in counselling as in any other task we undertake. A few clients, however, will not respond to counselling because the process is inappropriate to their needs. In cases like this it is important that competent supervisors can give support to the counsellor who may feel he or she has failed. We provide a group of five very experienced counsellors as supervisors to all our counsellors. They are available at any time by telephone so no counsellor need worry overduly about his or her performance.

Gay Bereavement

If, as may be, some 5% of the population are more or less exclusively homosexual, where can a gay person seek help with his mourning and grief when his long-term partner dies?

Something is beginning to be done. The Gay Bereavement Project in London is one of the groups that make up the London Voluntary Services Council Bereavement Projects Group. The Project is manned by volunteers, all with a minimum training and currently supervised by Bernard Williams, Convenor of the Project. Bernard Williams himself is supervised by Margaret Branch (Counsellor, Albany Trust, social worker and psychotherapist, the Maudsley and Westminster Hospitals), and she also keeps a friendly eye on all volunteers and is available for consultation. Volunteers have attended Cruse and other courses in the past, and recently Bernard Williams and Dudley Cave, the Project's Press and Publications Officer, attended a week's course at St. Christopher's Hospice under Susan Le Poidevin. DUDLEY CAVE here describes how the Project tries to be of help.

Many women and men live in stable homosexual partnerships and, on the death of one, the survivor will have all the problems which have to be faced by widows and widowers plus some 'hidden extras'. The estimate of the actual number of homosexuals in the population varies with the definition of the term, but it seems that at least 5% are exclusively, or almost exclusively homosexual.

The survivor of such relationships has no rights to the dead partner's estate and, in the absence of a valid will, may lose home as well as partner. Even where there is a will, relations can threaten to contest it and many homosexuals would give up their rights rather than be exposed.

Grieving can be difficult. All too often clergy conducting funeral services will assume heterosexuality and ignore the person sitting alone shrouded in grief, who is the real 'chief mourner'. Some clergy are unable to deal with their own feelings about homosexuality and, even when they know that a loving relationship existed between the deceased and someone of the same sex, they are unable, or unwilling, to mention it in the service.

In many communities there are gay couples who live together but keep up the fiction that they are just flat mates. Their neighbours guess the truth but the matter is never spoken of. These neighbours would call on a widow or a widower with words of sympathy and offers of help, but would find it very difficult to call on the survivor of a same-sex couple. It is not that they do not care but they do not know what sort of words would be right in the circumstances.

At work, on the death of a spouse, the survivor will be given time off to cope with some of the problems. The same-sex survivor would be lucky to get more than half a day off to pay last respects to a good friend. They have no opportunity to talk out their grief with colleagues and often little opportunity to talk out their situation with anyone.

The Gay Bereavement Project

The Gay Bereavement Project is a small, north London based group doing its best to help in this area of concern. Their referrals come mainly from London Gay Switchboard whose volunteer operators are aware of the work of the Project and will give the number of the duty volunteer to any caller. The calls come in from all over the United Kingdom as the London Switchboard is the only one offering a 24-hour service. Nor does the Project have any out-of-London phone numbers publicly available at the moment, though there are some valuable contacts elsewhere, and they do know quite a few sympathetic clergy in various places.

The Project not only gives some support and guidance to the bereaved but, by publicity, encourages gay couples to make wills and keep them up to date; to name partners as next of kin on going into hospital, and, in the event of a partner dying, to ring Gay Switchboard on 01-837 7324 as soon as possible. Switchboard or the Project can help find clergy or secular officiants who understand the love felt for the dead friend and will conduct the funeral service suitably.

Reference
"Bereavement Counselling for Gay Individuals" by Reva Lee Segal & David D. Hoefer. *American Journal of Psychotherapy*, October 4, 1981, Vol. V, No. 4.