

A guide for relatives when someone dies in hospital

INFORMATION BOOKLET

If English is not your first language, or you require information in another format, then please contact our Help and Advice Service on 0800 587 6513.

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Introduction

We would like to express our sympathy to you at this sad time. When someone dies there are many decisions and arrangements to be made.

You probably do not want to even think about practical arrangements, but there are some things that have to be done. However, time can be taken over many decisions as very few things need to be decided immediately.

This booklet aims to provide some useful help and practical advice during the early days of your bereavement. It gives guidance on who can help and where further information can be obtained, as well as explaining procedures such as registering a death and arranging a funeral.

At the back of the booklet you will also find some thoughts on bereavement and how it can affect people. Please read, and if you find it helpful then put it somewhere safe so that you can read it again as time passes.

You will also find various adverts in the pages of this booklet. Any decision you make regarding using these services must be a very personal choice. An advert appearing in this booklet does not necessarily mean that the hospital Trust has particular knowledge of a firm.

Paying your respects

Once a person has left the ward on which they were being treated, it is still possible to attend the hospital's mortuary (situated at the very rear of the hospital) where special viewing rooms are made available by appointment.

If you wish to make use of this then please contact the ward that was caring for your relative/friend who will arrange a timed appointment. The best arrangement is to visit between 9am and 4.30pm on a weekday, and it is requested that people visiting the same person should try and share a visiting time together if at all possible. Arrangements can be made outside these times but families may be assisted by non-clinical staff on these occasions. In many cases it may be considered most appropriate to leave visiting until after a funeral director has transferred the deceased to their more local 'chapel of rest', where time can be spent in more peaceful surroundings.

Tissue donation

Most people are aware that hundreds of lives are saved every year by donated organs, such as hearts and kidneys. Many people do not realise that donated tissues such as skin, bone, and heart valves can dramatically improve the quality of life for others, and even save them.

If specific instructions have been left by the deceased regarding tissue and organ donation then these should have been notified to ward staff. However, a person's wishes regarding tissue donation can still be respected even after death e.g. in the case of corneal and heart valve transplantation etc. where someone is discovered to be on the Donor register.

Please ask a member of staff to contact the tissue donation team as soon as possible if you know this formed part of the deceased's wishes. It must always be remembered that it is not always possible to take tissues even if a person held very strong views on the subject. The same is true where people donate their body to medical science as this has to be organised in advance and depends upon medical schools being able to accept a donation at a particular time.

Patients property

Ward staff will need to compile a list of all personal items that may have been brought into hospital. It may not be possible to complete this list around the time of a person's death and therefore property may need to be collected from the ward at a later date. Please discuss this with ward staff if it affects your situation. In order to safeguard items considered to be of value, the hospital has guidelines which staff must follow. This means, for example, that only wedding rings may be left with the deceased.

All other items appearing to be of valuable will be kept for you at the General Office and in due course the patients property officer will write to the next of kin (as detailed in patient's records) explaining how they may be collected.

If you have any questions, please contact the Patients Property Office 0191 569 9171.

Please note that any non-valuable items will only be retained for one month.

Medical Certificate of Cause of Death

To enable you to register the death you will require a medical certificate which shows the cause of death.

Depending on the circumstances of the death this will be issued in one of the following ways:

Issued by the hospital doctor

The hospital certificate is usually ready for collection the day after the death; however, to avoid a wasted journey to the hospital, it is best to telephone the ward for confirmation that this has been completed and is now available to collect. The certificate should remain in the sealed envelope until it is handed over to the Registrar.

The doctor who has written the Certificate of Cause of Death may ask for permission for a Post Mortem examination to be carried out. It is your decision whether you grant permission for this. If you decide to grant permission you will be asked to sign a form.

Issued by the Coroner

Occasionally deaths have to be reported to the Coroner who will decide if there should be a post mortem examination, for example, in the event of a sudden death, or where the cause is unknown. If this is likely then the ward staff will discuss this with you. In these cases the Coroner will make the arrangements for an interim and/or final death certificate.

The Coroner's office will contact you as soon as possible to discuss these issues, however, it should be noted that the Coroner does not need the permission of relatives to order a post mortem examination. A post mortem examination may cause some delay before you can proceed with the funeral arrangements, although in the mean time you can still discuss these with the Funeral Director.

Registering the death

Once you have obtained the Certificate of Cause of Death you must then register the death. You have up to five days to do this from the date of death, although this may be delayed if a post mortem is required.

Due to the fact that the death has occurred in Sunderland it is best registered by the Registrar at the Civic Centre in Sunderland. In exceptional circumstances, if your home is some distance away, special arrangements may be made by contacting the Registration Service.

An appointment must be made to register a death and this can be done in two ways: by telephoning 0191 5205553 or online at <http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=480>. The Registration Service can be found at the Civic Centre, Burdon Road, Sunderland, SR2 7DN. Opening times are currently:- Monday - Thursday: 9am - 5pm, Friday 9am - 4.30pm.

The certificate of Cause of Death will have been given to you by the ward staff in a sealed, white envelope, along with a list of those people who can register the death and also what information will be required about the deceased by the Registrar. Once the registration is complete the Registrar will give you a certificate for either burial or cremation – often known as the ‘Green Form’. You will be given the option to leave this form with the registrar provided the burial or cremation is to take place in Sunderland. However you are entitled to take the green form away with you, but in which case it must be handed to your funeral director before any further arrangements can be made. You may consider asking the Registrar for copies of the death certificate which are obtainable for a fee. These can be useful when notifying banks etc of a persons death.

“Tell Us Once”

This is a service offered by the local authority but only at the time of making your booking to register the death. If you take advantage of this service then a number of agencies can be informed of a person's death at the time of registration. This may well save distressed relatives the effort of making numerous phone-calls to the various agencies who have supplied services in the past. It is a free service and well worth consideration.

Support and information

Local information about registering a death can be found on Sunderland City Council's website (www.sunderland.gov.uk).

Information on national support agencies and what needs to be done when someone dies can be found at www.direct.gov.uk in the 'money, tax and benefits' section under bereavement.

Chaplaincy

A member of the chaplaincy team is available 24 hours a day and can be contacted via the hospital switchboard. Support can be offered on the ward at the time of death or any time afterwards. You may also want contact with bereavement groups outside the hospital and the chaplains can help with this.

Family Doctor (GP)

The hospital doctor will inform the GP of your relative's death and they may be able to offer you support and further information, particularly about the cause of death.

We hope that the information in this leaflet will be of some assistance, but if you have any further concerns please do not hesitate to ask.

If the information in this leaflet does not answer your queries or accommodate your needs for a particular cultural or religious reason, please ask to speak with the Duty Matron or Chaplain. We are here to help you!

Arranging the funeral

A Funeral Director of your choice can be contacted at any time following a death and they will also be able to give you help and advice. However, they cannot register the death for you.

Funerals can be expensive and you are entitled to ask the Funeral Director for details of these costs. It is a good idea to obtain at least two written estimates to compare. If the person who registers the death is in receipt of state benefit then there may be some financial help from the Department for Work and Pensions. If you arrange for a funeral you are responsible for paying the bill, so know where the money is coming from in advance of registering the death.

Burial or Cremation?

Any funeral director will need to know your whether you wish a burial or cremation to be organised as each require different forms to be completed. If you are unsure and wish to spend time discussing this further at home, then please let the funeral director know as soon as you have reached a decision. You will need to make this decision before registering the death, it may be useful to establish the wishes of the deceased perhaps by consulting the will or other instructions which may have been left.

Useful telephone numbers

Hospital Switchboard: (0191) 565 6256

Chaplaincy: (0191) 569 9180

Patient's Property Office: (0191) 569 9171

Registration Service Sunderland City Council: (0191) 520 5553

Samaritans: 116 123 National (freephone)

Sunderland Counselling Service: (0191) 514 7007

H.M. Coroner: (0191) 561 7843

Key points to remember

1. You will require a medical certificate to enable you to register the death, this will be issued by the hospital or the Coroner, depending on circumstances.
2. The death should be registered within 5 days (a delay may occur if a post mortem is required).
3. Do not hesitate to contact the ward, or the hospital Chaplaincy, if you require assistance.
4. You may contact a funeral director at any time who may be able to assist you in making arrangements.

Following a Bereavement

Emotional Support

The Chaplaincy Department
Sunderland Royal Hospital

Tel: 0191 5699180

Emotional aspects of grief

- The death of a loved one is an experience that we are all forced to face at some time in our lives. Death is a part of life's cycle and to mourn deeply for someone we have loved is an entirely normal experience.
- However, people find it uncomfortable to talk about death and in many ways we are even discouraged from thinking about it. This can make it difficult for us to turn to others for support, even though what we most need is someone with whom to talk and express our feelings.
- Each of us experience grief in our own particular way and no two people are entirely alike. People from different cultural backgrounds will have different ways of supporting each other. On the other hand, there are several experiences in grief which appear to be common to everyone, and this leaflet will describe some of these experiences in order to help you through the whole process.

There is a need to mourn

- The reason that every culture has some form of funeral ritual is that the ritual itself provides a focus for our grief. At the funeral, if we have not begun already, we have the opportunity to mourn openly for our loved one, and say goodbye.
- Mourning is essential. We must experience whatever feelings emerge within us and try to express them out loud, preferably to someone else. It is necessarily a painful process that we have to go through, and there are no short cuts. It is rather like having a piece of work to do. It may take many months, or even years, to feel like your old self again, so give yourself lots of time to complete the work of grief.

What can I expect to feel

- While no two people experience grief in the same way, the feelings described on the following pages are a sample of the many that can occur. It is rare to move smoothly from one stage to the next, or even experience all the feelings listed. Rather, you may have setbacks and sometimes feel as if you are having to start your grief all over again. Don't be disheartened by this. As long as you are allowing yourself to feel whatever you feel, and are gradually rebuilding your life, you are doing the work of grief.

Shock

- To feel shocked at the news of the death of someone close to you is a natural reaction. You may be feeling numb and unable to believe it's true. Some people are unable to feel very much for some time; some become quiet and withdrawn, while others quickly become agitated and anxious.
- Whatever you are feeling try to bring it to the surface and express it. Don't try to put on a brave face in order to protect yourself or others from embarrassment.

Expressing your grief

- Grief raises many emotions and it is important to allow yourself to feel whatever you feel. In the early months of grief you will probably feel moments of sharp intense grief interspersed with a more constant sense of dull loss.
- You may be feeling very lost in the world, and simple daily chores may involve painful recollections of tasks previously done together.
- Going to bed at night or waking in the morning may feel particularly lonely and upsetting. People sometimes have difficulty falling asleep though, because grief is such an exhausting variety of emotions, many people feel very tired a lot of the time.

Anxiety

- It is quite common for people to feel anxiety (the same as fear) in the early stages of grief when they are having to face an unclear and unknown future.
- If you notice that you have persistent physical sensations of anxiety (such as a pounding heart-beat, muscle tension, increased perspiration and breathing) or if you find that you worry a lot, it may be helpful to learn how to relax.
- Learning to relax is a useful skill which many people can teach you these days. If your anxiety symptoms persist, contact your GP and ask to be referred to someone who will be able to help you with your anxiety.

Anger

- Life can feel very unjust when someone close to us dies. So it is natural to feel some anger in grief. For some people, however, feeling angry is the only way they know how to grieve.
- You may be feeling angry at the unfairness of the fact that your relative is dead. Or you may be feeling that medical services could have done more or should have reacted differently. If you have concerns about the service you have received, ask for a discussion with a senior member of staff involved in the care of your relative.
- Mostly we feel anger about the death itself and our feeling of helplessness. A part of you may be feeling some anger towards the person who has died (for example, "How could they leave me like this?" or "Why didn't they look after themselves properly when they were alive?") though you may feel more awkward about sharing these feelings. Again, try to talk about them with someone you trust and who is a good listener.
- Avoid bottling up your feelings as they will only catch up with you later.

Guilt

- Another universal feeling in grief is guilt, which is simply anger turned on oneself. You may be feeling that there was more that you could have done, that you could have reacted more quickly to signs that the person was in distress. You may have been, or felt yourself to have been, responsible for your relative who has died and now that they are gone you blame yourself for not having taken better care of them. It is worth remembering that for every action we take in life there are always many other actions we could have taken – we usually end up simply taking the action which seems to be the right one at the time.
- If you have been caring for your relative for a long time before they died, your feelings of loss may be complicated by some milder feelings of relief (that both you and the deceased are released from a long painful illness, for example). This is quite understandable and does not make you a bad person for feeling it. It is helpful if you can talk through these feelings with someone else so that you can let go of your guilt.
- If the death was more sudden, it may have left you feeling guilty about things left unsaid. There is often a great deal of unfinished emotional ‘business’. Perhaps you did not say how much you cared or you did not say you were sorry about things you may have said or done in the past or perhaps you did not say “thank you” for the happiness that he or she brought you; and maybe you did not say goodbye. Perhaps it is worth remembering the good things that you were able to give them when they were alive; if you think of what they would be feeling about you right now, if you had died and they had lived, you may have a clearer idea of what you actually meant to them.
- Again, it is important to express these painful thoughts and feelings in both tears and words since it is only through expressing our grief that we are able to get through it effectively.

Depression

- Acute anxiety and anger often gradually give way to more constant feelings of depression and apathy (a feeling that you don't want to do anything). This happens as you finally come to realise at a deeper level that your loved one will never return. The fight and anger against this realisation and the feeling that somehow "none of this is real" dissolves into a well of despair.
- Unfortunately, these feelings of hopelessness often coincide with a time when all the immediate friends and family who were available for support at the funeral seem to be scarce. Our friends are often embarrassed at not knowing what to say to us and, sometimes without realising it themselves, they stay away.
- Similarly, people often worry that they may become a burden on others and consequently avoid contacting the very people who they would find easy to talk to. Try to remember that if a friend had turned to you for support in their grief, there is a good chance you would feel honoured that you had been asked to help them.
- If you are feeling particularly low, you may wish to contact one of the bereavement counselling organisations at the back of this booklet, or to contact your GP.

Taking care of yourself

- The work of grief is very exhausting and places great physical demands on the body, as well as the more obvious emotional ones. You may feel physically exhausted and tired a lot of the time and consequently, you may have more colds and flu than normal. If any symptom persists, be sure to tell the doctor.
- Try to look after yourself. Eat well and regularly, even if you are not particularly hungry. Get plenty of rest, and sleep if you can. If you do have sleep problems, speak to someone who can help; your doctor may be able to refer you to someone who can train you to relax naturally and therefore sleep more easily.
- Give yourself lots of time. Don't rush back to work if you are not feeling up to it, but keep your workplace informed. If necessary, obtain a letter from your doctor to give your boss in order to protect your job. Try to plan things in the future to work towards and look forward to, but try to avoid making any sudden major life decisions, such as moving house. So often decisions made in grief are regretted later on. Try to involve friends and family members in your planning and listen to their views as well as your own. Many people find that a gentle routine is helpful.

Recovery

- Grief is such a universal human experience that to talk of 'recovery' is perhaps the wrong word. However, time really is a great healer when it comes to grief. When you are newly bereaved, it is hard to imagine that eventually you will find a way to live without your loved one. It may be hard to imagine that you will ever be able to laugh or enjoy yourself again.
- Somehow, with time, you will be able to take up the threads of your life and begin to weave a new future. It may be a different future from what you expected but it will not necessarily be any less positive than the past; there will almost certainly be good things waiting for you in the future.
- There may be many new hurdles to face, things to learn and challenges to meet. In facing these challenges, friends and relatives are an important means of support. Therefore, do your best to maintain your contact with people who have been important to you in the past. Try to avoid becoming isolated or withdrawn.
- Overcoming grief is not a smooth process. There are many ups and downs. Pangs of grief can sometimes occur years after a death, when you thought you had recovered from it. This is to be expected since you will never forget the person you have lost; their life, however long or brief it was, will have changed the course of your own forever. You may find it comforting to realise that, even though someone dear to you has died, their influence on you and others lives on. The person you are today is probably very different from what you would have been like had you never known the deceased person. In some ways therefore their spirit lives on through you.

- In time you may find you have not thought about grief for a few minutes, and later this may stretch to hours at a time. At first you may feel guilty that you are not actively grieving, particularly if you have managed to enjoy yourself for a change. Gradually you will feel more comfortable about enjoying the company of other people and new relationships. But, whatever happens, you need not fear that you will ever forget what your loved one meant to you. The aim is to find a place and time in your life where you can continue to focus your feelings for the person you have lost, without letting your grief become an obstacle to your own life.

The do's and don'ts of grief

- **Do** express your feelings as much as possible.
- **Do** talk through what has happened and what you are feeling with someone you trust (your family, a close friend or an appropriate support group).
- **Do** contact one of the voluntary or hospital organisations listed in this booklet if you would like someone to talk to. They are there to help you.
- **Do** take good care of yourself; get lots of rest, eat well and give yourself lots of time to grieve.
- **Do** begin to make longer term plans for the future so that you always have something to look forward to but remember: don't rush into any big life changes.
- **Do** contact your doctor if you feel unwell or would like the doctor to refer you to someone to talk to.
- **Do** keep in touch with friends and family. Remember that most people feel honoured to be asked to help. However, many people feel awkward and embarrassed about offering their help, so it may be left up to you to ask for it, even though this may be difficult for you.
- **Don't** hide your feelings: try to bring out into the open whatever you are feeling. This is central to the work of grief.
- **Don't** make any major life changes while you are still grieving. Give yourself lots of time to think about changes you may wish to make and discuss these plans with others.
- **Don't** enter into any financial or legal arrangement unless you fully understand it.
- **Don't** hurry yourself to overcome your grief. There is no fixed time that it takes to get over bereavement.
- **Don't** let others rush you into anything before you are ready. But remember that sometimes you may not know whether you are ready for something unless you give it a try.
- **Don't** turn to drugs, smoking or alcohol to stop yourself feeling the pain of grief.

Your GP

- Your doctor is responsible for co-ordinating your overall physical and emotional health. Although GPs are usually very busy and unable to offer you a lot of time, he or she may be able to decide what sort of help, if any, you require. The GP, for example, may be able to refer you to a specialist bereavement counsellor, or they may encourage you to contact one of the excellent voluntary groups in or near Sunderland.

Registering a death

To register deaths, you will need to make an appointment by calling 0191 520 5553 or by booking online at the website address below and then attend:

Sunderland City Council
Civic Centre, Entrance 6, Burdon Road,
Sunderland SR2 7DF United Kingdom

All the extra information can be found here:

<http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/index.aspx?articleid=480>

To contact registrars by phone or post, the address is below.

Registrars

Please contact by telephone during office hours Monday to Friday or email.

You can also write to the address below.

Address: Sunderland Registration Service
Civic Centre, Sunderland SR2 7DN
United Kingdom

Email: registrars@sunderland.gov.uk

Tel: 0191 520 5553

Advice, support and comfort for the bereaved at:
[www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/Death/
WhatToDoAfterADeath/index.htm](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/Governmentcitizensandrights/Death/WhatToDoAfterADeath/index.htm)

Cruse

0808 808 1677
www.cruse.org.uk

Age U.K

0800 169 2081
www.ageuk.org.uk

The Compassionate Friends

0345 123 2304
www.tcf.org.uk

Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide (SOBS)

0300 111 5065
www.uk-sobs.org.uk

Samaritans

116 123
www.samaritans.org

Bereavement Advice Centre

0800 634 9494
www.bereavementadvice.org

Useful websites

www.nhs.uk

www.chsft.nhs.uk

This information was correct at the time of printing. While the Trust makes every reasonable effort to keep its information leaflets up to date, very recent changes may not yet be reflected in the guidance and you should discuss this with the clinical staff at the time of your appointment.

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Notes

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal dotted lines, typical of primary school writing paper. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

