

The future of bereavement support: The next 60 years



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Abstract: Cruse Bereavement Care is marking its 60th year with events throughout 2019. In July the anniversary conference *Bereavement Care – Past Present and Future* hosted an international line-up of speakers. Former Cruse CEO Debbie Kerslake hosted the final panel session which looked to the future.

It seems only appropriate that on the 60th anniversary of the charity Cruse Bereavement Care, as well as celebrating all that the organisation has achieved in the past, it also looks ahead to the next 60 years to ensure it continues to deliver the highest standards of care for bereaved people. Providing face-to-face, telephone and online support through a network of more than 5,000 volunteers, it is the largest bereavement care organisation of its kind in the world. It has always drawn on research, latest thinking and best practice, supported by Colin Murray Parkes, its Life President and longest-standing volunteer, at an astonishing 53 years. But what will it need to do to ensure it continues to be supporting bereaved people for the next 60 years?

The world in 2019 is very different to that of 1959, when Margaret Torrie set up what was then called *Cruse Clubs Counselling Service for Widows and their Families*, having seen what she described as the desperate plight of so many widows at that time. The world in 2079 will undoubtedly be significantly altered and the Cruse 60th anniversary conference held in Birmingham in July 2019, with its line-up of speakers from around the world, and attended by internal and external delegates from across the bereavement sector, provided a perfect opportunity to seek the thoughts of international experts as to what it may look like in 60 years time, and to consider the impact on bereaved people. The final session concluded with Carl Becker, Chris Hall and Robert Neimeyer putting forward their predictions. Some themes that emerged in discussion could have been anticipated, others came perhaps as more of a surprise. Each of the panellists began by speaking for four minutes on what they saw the next 60 years looking like for bereavement care.

Robert Neimeyer, Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Memphis and Director of the Portland Institute for Loss and Transition, focused on developments in technology. He showed a short video clip – *New Dimensions in Testimony*.¹ Starting with a scene from the film *Superman*, in which Superman has a conversation with a hologram of his dead father, it goes on to show the stories of holocaust survivors being captured using holographic technology. This enables them to speak about their experiences and answer questions. As Robert highlighted, this raises the possibility that our ability to think about the people we have lost may be transmuting quickly to the possibility of speaking *with* the people we have lost. This is no longer imagination but a reality. The Shaw Project, for example, is putting together a three-dimensional holographic image of a person that is responsive to natural language enquiries.

A company in the UK is already planning to construct just such holographic images, video-taping people – their lives, memories, emotions and relevant anticipations beyond their death. This holographic image can then be given to the family at an agreed time after their death. This image would be responsive to questions asked by living members of the family.

There are companies that are already harvesting our digital legacies – the text messages we send, the emails that we write and the Skype conversations with our families. All of these are potentially available to develop a response in much the same way as when we are asked questions.

¹ *New Dimensions in Testimony* preserves Holocaust survivors stories www.youtube.com/watch?v=w83pe-0noUU

This is one of many possible futures of bereavement care and as Robert pointed out ‘the future is now’. This was a stark reminder to me, and I think others in the audience, of the speed of developments and how our field is not immune to the impact of technology.

The key theme of the address by Carl Becker, the Specially Appointed Professor of Policy Science at the Medical School of Kyoto University, was the devastating effect of climate change. In Japan, summer temperatures have risen in the past 10 years. There are increasing numbers of heat-related deaths and the crime rate has risen significantly with a clear connection between crime and heat.

In the longer term, unless mankind changes its lifestyle and reduces CO₂ emissions, the prospects for the planet are terrifying. With global temperatures rising, Carl foresaw disastrous changes in climate resulting in extremes. Hotter summers raise the level of unexpected elderly deaths due to dehydration and heat prostration. There will be drought and famine; rising sea levels; movement in populations and communities; an increase in mass casualty events; the exhaustion of fuel supplies, war and conflict over disputed resources; movement in populations and communities; exacerbation of the rich/poor divide; a huge increase in crime; and shootings, for example, may become the norm. Human-caused crimes – locally against individuals, massively against the environment – will create unprecedented rises in the number and nature of unexpected bereavements.

Global warming poses such a threat that it puts the future of mankind in doubt. In the official report of the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, this could come in as short a timescale as 30 years. Carl painted a picture of people struggling to survive, trying to find food or sheltering from the weapons of disease and destruction. *‘We are planting seeds in our daily lifestyle that will impact the sorts of lives and deaths that our children or that we will face in the near future. Our business of bereavement care will not be able to keep up with the market.’* He called for a stop to death-ignoring cultures with much greater awareness that death is not so far away. His message of the fundamental need to meet the challenge of the climate crisis is one that is being debated and increasingly supported across the world. What I had never heard before now was the discussion focusing on the impact of bereavement. This raised the question for me of the role that those who work in the sector may have or indeed should have in these vital debates.

Chris Hall, the Director and Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement, also highlighted the impact of global warming as the key factor impacting on bereavement care. He drew on an example in Australia of the devastating bush fires 17 years ago, leading to 173 deaths, and the projections are that the scale of such traumatic mass casualty events will increase as a result of

climate change. He also referred to scientific developments including the use of immersive virtual reality and artificial intelligence in psychotherapy as well as the growing of human organs in a laboratory. In time, as Chris said, *‘being able to access spare parts will enable people to live till the age of 150’*, posing questions about our sense of control of death, life trajectories as well as the quality of life. Such a vision also raises questions about the impact on bereavement.

Regarding the more immediate future Chris talked about the importance of the legislative framework and its influence on bereavement care. In Victoria, voluntary assisted dying legislation has come into effect and other Australian states are now looking at this. This raises many questions and issues including eligibility and family decision-making, particularly where family members may disagree with the decision. It will be an issue that is increasingly discussed in the future.

Chris described grief and bereavement as like sex education in the 1960s; not forming part of normal discourse and with a wealth of euphemisms. He hopes, rather than anticipates, that there will be a growing awareness and recognition of grief as both a social and a health issue and that we will get a more comprehensive public policy around grief.

Discussion

Each of the panel members agreed on the importance of developments in technology, recognising that they are already affecting how we live our lives including how we communicate with and relate to one another. Relationships with children, for example, can be heavily mediated by text and social media and these may enable a deeper level of connection as they may, for example, feel able to text words they do not feel able to verbalise. I agree with Chris’s point that, *‘we sometimes cast technology in this frame that it separates and distances us, but I think it has the power to connect and strengthen’*.

Studies clearly show that every demographic group, including those who are 65 and older, make use of social media, spending many hours a day accessing Facebook, email and so on and this is even more true for younger cohorts. In terms of bereavement the internet has become a place where people grieve, providing the possibility of connecting instantaneously with others whose losses are very like their own, for example a teenager whose parent dies through suicide. There are many advantages, including being able to find an online community and being able to access support in one’s own language when local services may not be available. However, there are risks, as shown in sites that help individuals take their own lives. It is not the technology which is good or bad, but the understanding and information that it can provide.

Thus, all of the panel recognised that developments in technology will be key in the next 60 years including

impacting on continuing bonds and ways of working with those who are bereaved, but there was debate over some of the benefits, challenges and issues presented. It was questioned, for example, whether virtual experience is another means of denying death and if so, is this useful? Certainly, it is a very different experience when someone dies in your arms and fear was expressed that we may be losing the skills of holding and feeling people, if we rely too much on technology.

Concern was raised about limited access with the cost of technological innovations meaning that they are only available to the limited number in society who can afford them.

In a discussion of this kind at a bereavement care conference, it was perhaps unsurprising that technology formed an important part of the discussion. What was more unusual was to hear the topic of climate change, with convincing arguments being made about both its short- and long-term impact, not only in terms of the number of people dying and the cause of death but also on place of death. With a rising death rate, dying at home would become an inevitable trend, because there will not be enough hospital beds. If families learn how to care for their elders at home, as humans have done for hundreds of years, this will bring death back into the public consciousness.

There will clearly be a need for more bereavement support and hope was expressed that the research of Henk Schut and Maggie Stroebe as well as the speakers in this session (and indeed many others) will continue to bring greater scientific validity to how to treat various types of grievors, to ensure the most positive outcomes. Currently, even with the research that has already taken place, we are still not certain who will benefit from treatment, who will not and what kinds of treatment will benefit what kinds of people. Hopefully in the coming decades we will have far superior diagnosis and individual assessment, not to allow for the prescribing of drugs but in order to connect bereaved people with peers, volunteers or professionals who are best able to help. This would be entirely compatible with the whole movement towards individualised medicine.

Implications for Cruse

Just as Margaret Torrie could not have foreseen the world in which Cruse operates today, it is hard for us to predict the future in which the organisation will function. These world experts challenged Cruse, other organisations and individuals providing bereavement care, to be alert to the pace of change and to recognise the role they must play. They painted a picture that I found fascinating and terrifying at the same time. Developments that we might have felt were some distance in the future are in fact with us now. Cruse will need to be aware of technological advances, influence developments and use where appropriate and know what and where it is helpful to signpost bereaved

people. The fact that anyone can write anything online means that all those in the bereavement field, and this of course includes Cruse, have a responsibility to make clear that some information is better than others and some is incorrect. There may also be a role in accrediting the value of those sources.

The type of bereavement support that individuals want and need will be impacted by many factors. A 16-year-old may look for support, including through use of new technology, that is different to that sought by an older person. This highlights the need to fully engage bereaved people in the planning, development and delivery of services. The Cruse website dedicated to supporting bereaved young people www.Hopeagain.org.uk, for example, was developed by young people and they continue to be at the core of service development and delivery.

In terms of global warming we need to understand the threats posed and be aware of the impact on bereavement care. As people left the debate, there appeared to be much discussion, particularly around this topic. Whether this was due to it being a relatively new area for the bereavement sector to consider or due to the sheer nature of the threat it is not possible to say but I was certainly left feeling that the challenges presented by climate change have to be a key consideration in strategic planning.

With such a range of challenges posed including the rising number of deaths, an increase in sudden and traumatic deaths and bereavement support using new forms of technology, it might seem that the future for Cruse is bleak. On the contrary, Cruse was identified, to quote Robert, as ‘the world’s best example of an alternative future’. With its magnitude and capacity it can ‘change the universe in terms of the way people think about death, grief and loss’.

Conclusion

As a former CEO of Cruse, I accept the risk of bias, but this debate and indeed the whole conference confirmed my belief that Cruse will continue to develop and adapt to address the many challenges presented and better meet the changing needs of bereaved people, remaining at the forefront of bereavement care and still doing the excellent work that they do now in 60 years time.

It was a privilege to be asked to host this discussion and the only regret was that it could have gone on for longer. There were so many more questions and topics that I, and no doubt the audience, would have liked to have asked or developed including the use of prescribed drugs following bereavement; how we become a less death-denying society and best support communities to support one another at times of grief; and the increases in ageing populations and the impact this will have on rates of dementia and by implication, anticipatory grief. All these are likely to come to the fore.

Chris had made the point that it takes on average 17 years for the lessons from research to have an impact on practice. I was curious to know that if each of these international experts could implement the learning from just one piece of research far more quickly than this – what would it be? But that question remains for another day.

Nor were we able to discuss the final point, that some futurists are talking about people living on

Mars. ‘If a relative dies on another planet – talk about disenfranchised grief!’

One for conferences of the future!

For more from Robert Neimeyer go to www.portlandinstitute.org

For more from Carl Becker go to <https://researchmap.jp/read0012535>

For more from Chris Hall go to www.grief.org.au ■