

Bereavement Care – Tribute to Colin Murray Parkes

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Colin Murray Parkes with Cruse patron Her Majesty the Queen at St James Palace, celebrating Cruse's 60th anniversary

I was honoured to be asked to write something at this time, as Colin steps down as Chair of the Editorial Board of *Bereavement Care*. At first glance it seems like an easy ask, paying tribute to someone who has been at the forefront of care of those bereaved since the 1960s and who, in establishing *Bereavement Care* in 1982 for all those supporting bereaved people, together with the eminent child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Dora Black, launched what was to become a peer-reviewed international journal, respected throughout the world.

However, once I started, I was faced with a challenge: how do you summarise in just a few words the man who is universally recognised as a pioneer and the father figure in the field of bereavement care and the global impact that he has had? His far-reaching influence was evident, for example, at the 2017 International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society in Lisbon, Portugal. I joined speakers from around the world – Antonio Barbosa (Portugal), Amy Chow (Hong Kong), Maria Helena Franco (Brazil), Chris Hall (Australia) and Robert Neimeyer (USA) – to pay tribute to Colin's work. They each stressed the worldwide impact he has had on the lives of bereaved people and those working in the field. This included the influence of the journal *Bereavement Care*.

As the then chief executive of the charity Cruse Bereavement Care, I was able to talk first-hand about Colin's impact from a UK perspective including his work at

St. Christopher's Hospice, his work in major incidents and his volunteering for Cruse.

Having been recruited by the founder Dr (later Dame) Cicely Saunders, Colin set up the first hospice-based bereavement service and carried out the earliest systematic evaluations of hospice care, beginning a life-long relationship with the Hospice Movement and particularly St. Christopher's.

Colin's work in major incidents began with the disaster in 1966 when he planned and co-ordinated the support to families in the Welsh Mining Village of Aberfan, when 116 children and 28 adults were killed by a collapsing coal spill. Fifty years later I listened as Colin talked with tears in his eyes about the personal impact of this involvement and how it led him to act as consultant and adviser in many disasters including the air crash of Invicta International Airlines flight 435 in Switzerland (1973), the Bradford Football Club fire (1985), the capsizing of the Herald of Free Enterprise (1987) and the Pan-American Flight 103 explosion over Lockerbie (1988), the Rwandan genocide (1994) and the Indian ocean earthquake and tsunami (2004). In all these disasters Colin has not only focused on those who have been bereaved but also the support of the supporters, including professional and lay people.

Major incident is just one area in which Colin has played a key role in Cruse. Having been recruited by the founder Margaret Torrie in 1964, his involvement has continued to this day – an astonishing 56 years of volunteering, making him the longest serving of more than 5,000 volunteers. Throughout all these years he has shared his experience, his time and his vast expertise. As well as chairing the editorial board of *Bereavement Care*, his many key roles have included chair, trustee, clinical advisor, trainer, media spokesperson, council member and honorary life president together with his role as a consultant in major incident. Colin was the first representative of Cruse to go to New York after the 9/11 attacks in 2001 helping establish the systems of support for all the UK families who were flown out. He acted as advisor following the London bombings of 2005 and again following the fire at Grenfell Tower in 2017.

Colin's impact on Cruse has been immeasurable. It is no exaggeration to say that Colin is revered by Cruse volunteers and staff. At the Cruse conference a few years ago, a volunteer asked me would I take her photo. I said of course I'd be happy to. She then said, 'But can you get Colin Murray Parkes in the frame?' I suggested she just go and ask him if she could have a photo taken with him. She was far too over-awed to do this. I asked and of course she got her treasured photo.

Colin's role in *Bereavement Care* epitomises so much of what he has always brought to the field of bereavement care – his passion for sharing and furthering knowledge of the best ways of reaching out to and supporting those who are facing grief and bereavement; his unstinting willingness to teach people about bereavement; his commitment to evidence-based practice; his encouragement of research and his care of the carers, supporting all those in any kind of support role for those who are bereaved. His own writing has inspired a generation and through *Bereavement Care* he has helped bring together academics and researchers from across the world to develop new insight, understanding and learning.

At the beginning *Bereavement Care* was described as a 'regular magazine' for all who help bereaved people. The very first edition contained articles by the then director of Cruse Derek Nuttall, by Margaret Torrie and by Colin on the risk of suicide after bereavement. Over the next few editions, the Cruse news content quickly dwindled and very soon the journal became established as an academic source of reference that was read widely both outside, as well as within, Cruse, reaching out to all those who have a role – academics and practitioners, those in professional roles and volunteers. Early issues contained articles on for example, violent death and the media, bereavement among immigrants and refugees, working with bereaved children, helping disaster victims and bereavement by suicide, all topics that remain just as relevant today.

From the beginning and to this day the journal has not been afraid to discuss important and controversial subjects including the effectiveness of bereavement counselling. Does it help or harm people?

Way back in the Spring 1999 edition of *Bereavement Care*, Colin described in his editorial how 'information about bereavement is scattered across a wide range of journals, books, course papers, videotapes and web pages and emanates from an equally wide range of disciplines including psychology, psychiatry, palliative care, sociology, religion and medicine'.

Bereavement Care attempts to keep readers up to date by drawing on all of these sources (Murray Parkes, 1999).

Ten years later, writing in *Voices of Cruse*, written to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Cruse in 2009, a former managing editor Rosie Dalzell wrote 'we are determined not to sacrifice the unique character of an international journal that crosses boundaries between volunteers and

professionals and the many disciplines that are involved at times of bereavement' (Richards, 2009).

The journal has never strayed from this aim to draw on a broad range of disciplines. The Summer 2020 edition, for example has articles from the fields of clinical psychology, social science and medicine. It has also retained the goal of setting a high academic and scientific standard, with all leading articles being subjected to peer review and all authors being expected to provide fully referenced evidence in support of their claims. But at the same time, it has remained accessible to all. As Colin himself, once put it, 'we do not see the need to emulate the drab formats and pretentious jargon of those academic journals that mistake obscurity for wisdom' (Murray Parkes, 2010).

What has changed over time have been the methods of production and delivery as well as the format and style which have changed beyond recognition, with ever-increasing professionalism driven by Colin. Those who contribute to the journal range from relative newcomers to luminaries whose names are well-known throughout the bereavement sector and they come from across the world. With qualitative and quantitative research studies sitting alongside personal accounts, the result is something that can challenge, stimulate and broaden perspective.

Throughout all these changes Colin has been at the forefront, working tirelessly with the managing editors in Cruse, all those on the editorial board and the international advisors to make *Bereavement Care* what it is today, chairing the editorial board and overseeing all the developments as well as contributing regular features. In his 90s he has continued to bring flexibility, creativity and enthusiasm as well as his wisdom, vast expertise and international perspective and being Colin, he has done this in the gentlest and most unassuming way.

We live in a world where influencers on social media can have millions of followers who they encourage to follow a particular fashion or trend. In Colin Murray Parkes we have an influencer who has stimulated people to undertake research, to develop their understanding, skills, knowledge and practice and to constantly ask the question – how can we do this better? Through his influence on researchers, academics, practitioners and organisations he has genuinely impacted the lives of millions of bereaved people across the world and he will undoubtedly continue to do so.

Colin wrote, '*Compassion is of little use unless it is informed by understanding; experts are of little use unless they care*' (Richards, 2009)

It is clear that Colin cares as much about the needs of bereaved people today as he did all those years ago when he started as a young psychiatrist. He has dedicated his life to pioneering the development of bereavement support, contributing to both research and clinical practice and his role with *Bereavement Care* has been one part of this. Colin

utterly deserves his retirement from *Bereavement Care* but he will be greatly missed.

Bereavement Care has grown from a small inhouse journal to a unique one that is respected around the world and Colin has been there every step of the way, informing, guiding, supporting and inspiring.

On behalf of us all Colin – thank you! ■

Murray Parkes, C. (1999). Editorial. *Bereavement Care*, 18(1), 34.

Murray Parkes, C. (2010). Editorial. *Bereavement Care*, 29(2), 1.

Richards, S. (ed.). (2009). *Voices of Cruse 1959–2009*. Nigel Lynn Publishing & Marketing Ltd.