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EDITORIAL

Colin Murray Parkes

Sudden unexpected deaths, particularly those of unknown cause or resulting from violence, are inevitably traumatic for surviving families and sometimes give rise to post-traumatic stress or other psychiatric disorders. Such deaths will be reported to the coroner whose activities will have an important influence, for good or ill, on the families involved. The coroner usually orders a post-mortem examination regardless of the wishes of the family, funeral arrangements

are delayed, police enquiries carried out and, in many cases, a public inquest conducted, to enable the coroner to establish the cause of death.

In response to public criticisms, an independent Review of Coroner Services has been carried out in the UK. This has made a number of recommendations which, if implemented by the government, may well reduce the psychological impact of these bereavements. Families will be able to meet with the coroner and have access to inquest reports, the number of inquests held in public will be reduced and families will be consulted if any organs are to be retained.

All of these recommendations will make for a more humane and supportive system. But Britain still has far to go if it is to rival the services provided by the Coroner's Office in Sydney, Australia, where, from the outset, a team of counsellors work alongside the coroner's staff.

The special needs of people who have suffered traumatic bereavements such as

these are examined in a paper by Russell and O'Connor in this issue of *Bereavement Care*. Other bereaved people whose special needs have been neglected in the past include those with learning difficulties and ethnic minorities. We are proud

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to report here the findings of a systematic evaluation by Sandra Dowling and her colleagues at St George's Hospital, London. The results demonstrate the value of counselling and support by a specially trained group

of volunteers from a number of agencies, including Cruse Bereavement Care, to bereaved people with learning difficulties.

Shirley Firth presents the latest addition to our series on ethnic minorities. She addresses the changes in rituals and attitudes to bereavement among Hindus in Britain, while Susan Ahluwalia reviews some recent web pages devoted to ethnic issues and funeral rituals.

Finally, from the USA comes a new profession of 'thanatologist' combining skills in death education, pre-death and bereavement counselling. Those who attended the Fifth International Conference on Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society in Washington DC in 1997 will recall the hospitality of our hosts, ADEC, the Association for Death Education and Counselling. For those who did not, Kathleen Moore gives here an account of the activities of this large and influential organisation which may be the first in the world to offer basic education and training for thanatologists.