

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

as a feminine, caring activity, which might discourage men from engaging in this valuable form of support, both as volunteers and as service users.

There is not space here to explore the age and gender profile of volunteer befriending in general, but my current scoping research on behalf of the Mentoring and Befriending Foundation is indicating a pattern of older (55+) and largely female (76%) volunteer befrienders supporting the socially isolated. It would be interesting to match this against the profile of bereavement supporters in general, where, despite some of our best efforts, the white widow image persists.

I want to encourage more research into the efficacy of befriending as a mode of bereavement support. I also want to encourage myself and others who provide psychosocial support in this way, to reflect critically on whether the 'how' of our offering support influences the 'who' is engaged in that support. I am suggesting asking such questions as:

- By valuing the social support basis of befriending for reducing isolation and building resilience, do I encourage a perception of befriending as a feminine caring activity?
- Does the experiential group nature of the volunteer trainings and ongoing support I offer discourage certain groupings from being involved?
- Does the skills set associated with forming effective relationships which I look to develop in volunteers have an inherent feminine bias?
- Is the befriending focus in relationship, rather than a solution focus, counter-cultural for certain groups?

The answers to these, and similar questions, are complex but will help to make the best possible match between the support needs of bereaved people and the mode by which that support is offered.

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\* Field D, Reid D, Payne S, Relf M. Adult bereavement support in five English hospices: types of support. *International Journal of Palliative Nursing* 2006; 12(9): 430-437.

## RESEARCH AND EDUCATION

## The Centre for Death and Society

Bath, UK

**Glennys Howarth**

Director

**T**he Centre for Death and Society (CDAS), an interdisciplinary centre for research and teaching, was established at the University of Bath in September 2005. It acts as a catalyst and facilitator for research, education and training, policy development, media and community awareness, and is the UK's only institution dedicated to the social aspects of death, dying and bereavement.

The first programmes on 'Death and Society' were launched in October 2006. The MSc is a multi-disciplinary social science programme for professionals, pre-doctoral students and others interested in this rapidly growing field, while the certificate and diploma are two intermediate postgraduate programmes which can be taken in their own right. Plans for the future include a foundation degree for funeral directors and other honours programmes relevant to business and charities working in this sector.

Glennys Howarth, the Director of CDAS, has been researching and publishing in this field for almost 20 years. Tony Walter, Chair of Death Studies and Director of Studies for the Masters programme, previously set up a similar programme at Reading University and has wide-ranging interests, including afterlife beliefs, media coverage of death, the use of human remains in exhibitions and spiritual aspects of palliative care. Allan Kellehear has come from La Trobe University in Australia where he was Professor of Palliative Care and Director of the palliative care unit and set up health promotion reforms in this sector. All three have published and lectured extensively in their fields.

People working in this area can feel marginalised and isolated, and it is the centre's intention to bring together professionals, academics and practitioners from all over the world. In 2005 we ran the 7<sup>th</sup> International Conference on the Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal (DDD7) where there were

presentations on everything from palliative care in hospices to burials in ancient Rome. A similarly diverse conference (DDD8) is planned for 2007.

CDAS will not only host activities in Bath, but will act as a communication gateway, facilitating research and networking with others, and connecting those who have previously found it hard to collaborate because of geographical or financial constraints. We currently have links with national and local hospices including St Christopher's in London and Dorothy House in Wiltshire, and we are developing a number of research opportunities with both. Discussions are ongoing with professionals in the hospice and bereavement sector to develop summer schools and short courses for people working in these areas.

In addition to our links with hospices, we also have established relationships with a number of local, national and international organisations and institutions. These include:

- International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement
- Association for Death Education and Counseling (USA)
- National Association for Loss and Grief (Australia)
- Cruse Bereavement Care (UK)
- Bereavement Research Forum (UK)
- National Association of Funeral Directors (UK)

Some of these organisations will be liaising with us in providing in-service training for those working in professional services, and continuing education for community groups, promoting participation for all communities in their own end-of-life care, decision making, social preferences and service delivery needs. The centre will have a role in the wider community, with public lectures and symposia on subjects related to death, and an active media role. We also have an e-newsletter, to which anyone can subscribe, informing readers about relevant talks and events near them. ●

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