

Editorial

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Welcome to this special issue of *Bereavement Care* focusing on evaluation.

Evaluation is the process of making a judgment about the value of an activity. Most readers of *Bereavement Care* are likely to have made their own evaluation of what they do and probably believe that it is of benefit to most, if not all, the bereaved people with whom they work. Some may feel that it is not possible to systematically or scientifically evaluate a bereavement service because it is not possible to 'measure' the abstract and complex relationships and outcomes involved.

However, it is becoming increasingly important to be able to demonstrate the value of what we do, using robust methods. This is important not just to those funding our services, but to service providers and to our service users. Evaluation is not simply a quantitative tick-box, number-crunching procedure required by funders; it is a way of ensuring that what we do is acceptable, effective, and genuinely meets the needs of our clients and helps them achieve goals that are meaningful to them. Evaluation also allows us to share what we learn with others, contributing to the bank of knowledge that enables us to refine and develop further our skills and methods.

There is no doubt that evaluating bereavement services poses many challenges – ethical, financial and practical – and some of these challenges are highly complex. They include securing resources (money and time) and deciding which approach and instruments will best help us achieve our aims. Above all, we need to address ethical challenges – for example, ensuring that we do not harm people who have agreed to participate in our research. Too often, we hear of a 'gap' between the priorities of researchers and those of practitioners. This chasm is at its widest when practitioners feel their clients and their professional practice may be compromised by the requirements of research.

In this issue Henk Schut and Margaret Stroebe explore some of these matters in relation to researching adult bereavement services and Liz Rolls discusses those raised when evaluating childhood bereavement services. Liz and Alison Penny also provide a useful context with their report of a study they conducted to map evaluations of childhood bereavement services in the UK.

The other articles all describe different approaches to evaluation and the different and varied solutions their authors have found to the challenges they met. Cate

Newsom and colleagues outline the genesis and initial stages of an ongoing, ambitious project to evaluate the services provided by the voluntary sector organisation Cruse Bereavement Care Scotland. This project, a partnership with Utrecht University, is of particular interest in that it demonstrates how researchers and practitioners can work together constructively and positively, in 'synergy' as its title says, to produce a more robust result than if one or other had pursued the study on their own.

David Trickey and Danny Nugus describe an evaluation of a UK bereavement support programme for children and families who have experienced traumatic bereavement. This paper also demonstrates the narrow line that researchers have to tread between obtaining enough data to obtain a full and objective picture of service outcomes and over-burdening participants with multiple questionnaires.

Amanda Roberts and Sinead McGilloway describe the experience of a researcher 'embedded' within an organisation – in this case, a hospice – to evaluate the benefits of its bereavement support services. This article addresses directly the difficulties presented by random controlled trials to those working with vulnerable clients. It helpfully explains how the researchers worked around this by using a comparison, rather than control, group.

Breffni McGuinness and Niamh Finucane describe the pilot stages of their project, also ongoing, to evaluate an innovative arts and bereavement project. Completion of this pioneering evaluation will, it is to be hoped, produce sound evidence to support further developments in this field.

Each of these articles is very different. Each demonstrates that, while it may be difficult, it is possible to evaluate the complex and often subtle processes or outcomes of a bereavement support service. Together they show the breadth of some of the methods that can be adopted and some of the tools available.

We hope that this issue of *Bereavement Care* will encourage you to grapple with the challenges of evaluation. Critically examining how we work and what we achieve and sharing our findings with others will help us sustain, strengthen and further develop bereavement care. Without evaluation we cannot build on what we learn; we cannot be sure that what we do is genuinely beneficial for our clients, and we cannot demonstrate to those funding our services that it is money well-spent, and that together we are making a real difference to people's lives. ■