

Editorial

Martin Newman

We are now approaching the tenth anniversary of the 9/11 attacks in the US. A paper published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry* (Claassen *et al*, 2010) reports a study of the effects on suicide rates in communities living near the three crash sites. It found that post-attack suicide rates dropped significantly among communities within 150 miles of the site of the World Trade Center, the effect being most marked during the first two months after the attack. However no change was found among communities living near the Pentagon and Flight 93 crash sites. The authors suggest that increased access to mental health treatment post-attack may have mediated the drop in suicide rates, or a temporary increase in tolerance for mental health help-seeking may have resulted in a more supportive environment than usual.

This finding is relevant to this issue because a number of the papers deal with traumatic bereavement and community/organisational response.

Gibson, Gallagher and Tracey discuss workplace support for parents bereaved by the suicide of a child. Based on in-depth interviews with bereaved parents, they identify what was helpful, what was unhelpful, and what help and support these parents would have welcomed and found useful. Nothing expensive or difficult – just a named person within the organisation, a consistent bereavement policy and sensitivity from colleagues and line managers, suggesting a clear need for workplace bereavement awareness training.

Hall describes the official response to communities and individuals bereaved in the 2009 bushfires in the Australian state of Victoria. He notes how, in some communities, a ‘grief hierarchy’ emerged, with those who had lost partners and first-degree relatives being seen as more deserving of help than others who may have been equally affected by the deaths and losses. The community-based outreach service established was designed specifically to reach out and be available to everyone. Importantly, it drew on the existing strengths and resources of these communities, rather than flying in ‘experts’ to provide specialist services that local people, unused to the vocabulary of counselling and mental health problems and to ‘help-seeking’ itself, might have avoided.

McNally, like Gibson and her colleagues, used a qualitative approach to explore the impact on people’s lives of the killing of a parent in the Northern Ireland Troubles. He interviewed a number of people, now adults, and from their views and experiences develops his argument that

you cannot simply treat the individual in isolation from the political and social context in which the traumatic bereavement occurred. Any intervention with these people, still struggling with the bitterness and injustice of deaths and with the political divisions that fractured families as well as communities, must address these factors too.

Deaths in military service cannot be totally unexpected but are no less traumatic for all that. Ben-Sefer and colleagues discuss the particular plight of unmarried partners of people killed on active military service in Israel, where only the married are recognised by the authorities as part of the ‘family of bereaved’. They describe how a voluntary sector organisation, The Amuta, was established to meet the bereavement care needs of this disenfranchised group, and the how its members have benefited both from its support and the support of each other, as well as from participation in their own shared memorialising ceremony.

Last, but first in this issue, Rebecca Peyton describes her response to the sudden and tragic death of her sister Kate, shot while working as a BBC reporter in Somalia. It was to make a play, which she performed at last year’s Edinburgh Festival and is currently touring throughout the UK. She describes how her own experience resonates with audiences, and her amazement that so many people come up to her afterwards to thank her for making visible their unseen grief of (in one notable case) more than 50 years.

On a different note, Webwatch in this issue reviews bereavement (and other) websites for children and young people. The internet is an excellent resource but there can be concerns about the accuracy and quality of what it offers. Jill Sanders, who authors Webwatch, deplores the way some sites drop into disuse, with no notice or information that they are no longer active. She contrasts this with others that are well-used and maintained and provide a vital and valued source of support and information for young people for whom the help and advice of peers is particularly welcome. She also highlights the brilliance of sites that have capitalised on the unique attributes of the worldwide web and have invested in design and interactivity to maximise their appeal and accessibility to all children, including those with special needs. ■

Claassen CA, Carmody T, Stewart SM *et al* (2010). Effect of 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA on suicide in areas surrounding the crash sites. *British Journal of Psychiatry* 196 359-364.