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APSE Cemeteries and Crematoria Seminar

Caring and Sharing—the changing roles and responsibilities of Bereavement Services Managers



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How Well Did UK Bereavement Services Cope With the Pandemic?

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has affected all of our lives in ways we could never have envisaged a year ago.

I am personally in my 40th year of working in Bereavement Services and have never experienced anything quite like the situation we have had this year.

Quite bizarrely, last November I was asked to speak at an industry seminar which was due to be delivered in April 2020. The title of my paper was “Are You Prepared for a Pandemic”. The subject was chosen long before COVID-19 was known about. As the situation developed, I had started preparing my speech but the spread and advice from the Government became so fast moving, I was changing the wording on an almost daily basis. Eventually the seminar, like all events and gatherings at that time, was cancelled.

How Effective Were Pandemic Plans?

Given that I provide emergency cover to crematoria, I hope I am well placed to comment on this.

Judging by the volume of requests for assistance I was receiving during the first wave in spring, I would have to say some pandemic plans that were in place were not terribly effective.

To give some indication, prior to this pandemic I had 3 full time members of staff and 11 qualified cremator technicians among the 20 associates that I use as and when needed. On average we would have 4 people out providing emergency cover per week.

In the spring, I began to experience largescale enquiries and requests for assistance on a scale I had never seen before. In some cases authorities were updating their pandemic plans and wanted to check I had the capacity to help if needed, but others were in more urgent need and some would not have been able to operate at the required levels had we not been able to assist them.

During May, I had 13 people out assisting authorities for the entire month which is unheard of. To handle such an upsurge in demand we increased our full time staff to 6 and our pool of qualified cremator technicians to 17, providing emergency cover up and down the country. The remainder of my associates are ex Managers, administrators and chapel attendants.

In speaking with the ICCM, it was immediately apparent they were conducting unparalleled numbers of CTTS (Cremator Technicians Training Scheme) assessments. There was clearly a rush by authorities to get more members of staff qualified to operate cremators once the pandemic had hit.

What Changes Will You Need to Make to Your Future Pandemic plans?

If there is one area authorities were found wanting, it was resilience and a lack of staff being able to complete the jobs of other staff.

I have been carrying out an interim management assignment for one authority and they were having to provide staff from other areas of service to ensure adequate levels of chapel attendant cover were maintained.

I am already noticing in early November a run of authorities asking for administration assistance. It appears to be that management previously concentrated on getting more staff qualified to operate cremators but have not trained additional staff to carry out admin duties.

I personally like the idea employed by one of the large private sector crematoria owners who have staff changing roles every week. For example, a staff member would carry out administration one week, operate the cremators the following week and be on chapel attendant duty the week after.

This breeds a culture of being able to step into any of these roles and an appreciation of each role. It also does away with the “them and us” feelings that can exist between staff at the administration office and those both front and back of house at the crematorium building.

What Were the Main Staff Planning and Operational Issues?

Difficulties reported to me were as follows:

- ▶ In the early stages, having sufficient PPE.
- ▶ Having sufficient qualified staff to operate a shift system. Some authorities introduced a shift system so cremators were running for 12+ hours per day for weeks on end.
- ▶ Wear and tear on the machinery. Inevitably, if you run your cremators that hard for any extended period, you are putting pressure on them at a time when it is difficult to get a manufacturer to attend site and carry out any necessary repairs.
- ▶ Pressure of workload on staff and some finding it difficult to take a break.
- ▶ Coping when key members of staff became unwell.
- ▶ Limiting numbers of mourners allowed to attend services. This varied greatly, with some authorities not allowing any mourners. One of my clients in the spring was particularly busy as they were the only crematorium in their area to allow any mourners and at that time, limited numbers to 10.

What Were the Main Staff Planning and Operational Issues? (Continued)

- ▶ Managing social distancing of mourners. Social distancing guides put in place were often ignored by mourners, with the first 2 rows of pews being filled and making no use of the remainder of the chapel which was reserved to allow for proper distancing.
- ▶ Funeral directors complaining that neighbouring crematoria were operating different numbers.
- ▶ Significant drop in memorial income, crematoria were not able to offer memorial sales as staff could not see members of the public.
- ▶ Some crematoria were also not accepting renewals of memorials and extended the dedication period of all memorials free of charge as people couldn't visit. Some by 6 months, some by 1 year.
- ▶ In the early stages, closing of gardens of remembrance.
- ▶ Closing office reception to members of the public.
- ▶ Closing the Book of Remembrance room as we couldn't police social distancing.
- ▶ Crematoria having to increase storage facilities for the deceased.
- ▶ For a period, crematoria were not offering witness strewing or interments of ashes. There was then a build up of cremated remains in storage.

What were the surprises?

- ▶ The speed with which the pandemic took hold and deaths were increasing. On 5th March, there was 1 UK death recorded. Fast forward 1 month to 6th April, there were over 1,000 deaths recorded that day.
- ▶ The ever changing advice from the government and it not being consistent throughout the UK became difficult to keep up with.
- ▶ The speed with which cremation papers were submitted to the crematorium improved. One positive was with the medical papers, form 5 not being needed.
- ▶ The hospitals were e-mailing form 4 once the Doctor had completed it. Some crematoria reported receiving form 4 before the funeral had even been booked.
- ▶ Ignoring of advice on numbers of mourners allowed to attend services. Some funeral's made national headlines when 200+ people would turn up for a burial service.
- ▶ It is imperative authorities learn from the first wave as we are encountering a rise in COVID deaths again and coming into flu season. We must be as prepared as possible for whatever this unprecedented period continues to throw at us.
- ▶ When the media talks about key workers, those of us in bereavement are often forgotten, however it is to the credit of those in the sector that we got through an extremely difficult and challenging period in the spring.
- ▶ Thank you for listening. I wish all of our colleagues in the Bereavement Services well moving forward.

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Panel 2:

Andrew Bond, Wigan Council

Susan Moore, Norwich City Council

Lee Snashfold, APSE Associate

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