Sudden Death
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Objectives

Once you have studied this written lesson you should be able to:

1. Describe your initial action when called to an apparent death.

2. Distinguish between suspicious and non-suspicious death.

3. Detail action in cases of suspicious and non-suspicious deaths.

4. Explain the function of the Coroner and the Coroners Officer.

5. Describe the procedure for dealing with the property of a deceased person.

6. State your action in the case of suspected or attempted suicide.

7. List the general guidelines for informing people of the death of relatives or friends.

8. State who you would inform to attend the scene of a suspected work related death.

9. Identify the responsibilities of the first officer on the scene of a Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI).

10. Describe how the incident should be reported.

11. State who would continue any investigation into a Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI).
Introduction

One of the most unpleasant duties you will be called on to deal with is one which involves death. However unpleasant you may or may not find this duty, your priority must be first aid, then investigation and the preservation of the scene while always considering the feelings of the friends and relatives of the deceased.

Take a few minutes before you continue to consider the emotions that will be present at the scene of a death of a close relative or friend. You will be called into that emotionally charged atmosphere to deal with the situation in a professional manner.

"What should I do if I am called to the scene of a death?"

To answer this question, first look at the following framework. It is not a rigid procedure but will provide you with a basic structure on which to base your thoughts and actions.

* First Aid or confirmation of death.
* Investigation.
* Removal of the deceased.
* Protection of the deceased's property.
* Reporting the incident.
* Informing friends or relatives.

You will see rendering 'first-aid' is the first priority in the above list. Many times when police are called to what is believed to be a sudden death the person is found to be ill or injured or collapsed. We will take a typical incident which you will undoubtedly be called on to deal with on numerous occasions during your service.

On the journey to the location, compose your thoughts and consider the possibilities - what could this incident be about?
Is the person concerned:-

* on holiday?
* ill in bed?
* unconscious?
* dead from natural causes?
* dead from an accident?
* dead from suicide?
* dead in suspicious circumstances?

**On arrival at the scene.**

On arrival at the scene, you must try to make contact with the occupier by knocking at the door, ringing the doorbell, shouting through the letter box and so on. Try and gain information from the informant if it is possible to speak with them.

**but.....**

**whatever you do, always bear in mind the possibilities - it could be murder, and you may well destroy evidence which will make it more difficult to trace the offender. Always think about minimal disturbance of the scene and preserving evidence.**

This, of course, must not stop you from taking the appropriate action, but by considering it you may be able to minimise the damage.

If there is no answer - now what?

Make immediate enquiries of neighbours, friends and relatives. Is there anyone who can assist you to gain entry - some neighbours keep each other’s door keys.

Use your eyes - can you see anything which will indicate what you might be dealing with?

  * Milk on the step?
  * Build up of letters, papers?
Look through the windows and the letter box if you can. (Bear in mind that when you check the letter box, the smell might be quite overpowering - this may be a clue as to the result of your search!)

- Unwashed plates etc., in the sink?
- Half-eaten meals?
- Lights on in the daytime?

The occupant may be ill inside - we must now gain entry by force.

Section 17 PACE 1984 gives you power to enter premises by force to save life or limb or to prevent serious damage to property. You will learn later that for parts of Sec 17 you need "reasonable grounds" to believe the person is on the premises. You "do not" need reasonable grounds to save life or limb or serious damage to property. You MUST be able to justify your actions and record them accordingly.

Before you force entry where possible inform a supervising officer or CCC of your intent. Although in law you don't need a supervisor's authority to enter under S.17 PACE it is good practice to keep your supervisor advised of your actions. Obtain a witness if possible - a nearby colleague or friend or neighbour of the occupant.

Before you force entry, consider how you can do so causing the least damage possible. Before breaking a window, check to see if any of them (or any doors) are already open. Break a small window instead of a large one.

Before you break a window, make sure it will give you access to the house via a catch or handle. Don't forget to make suitable notes of what you damaged and why.

"Hello it's the police!"

Enter and search the premises slowly and carefully, it is a good idea to call out during your search that you are a police officer and to keep calling out. If there is an elderly person ill inside, your sudden appearance will not help them recover!

You have just entered the rear living room. Remember if there is a friend or neighbour with you, do you really want them to see what may have happened inside? This may be a good time to thank them for helping you get inside and ask them to wait at the front door!
STOP!

Assess what you are dealing with. In most cases the person will be obviously dead (although you still must not assume this).

All sudden deaths must be treated as suspicious until proved otherwise.

If it was suicide, perhaps by electrocution, is there still electricity causing danger? Are you entering the scene of a serious crime?

Is the kitchen knife a murder weapon?

Are the pills on the table anything to do with the death?

If the circumstances are in any way suspicious or it appears that it may have been suicide:-

* Call the Duty Officer
* Request CID to attend
* Request the Forensic Medical Examiner
* Remain with the deceased
* Do not touch or move anything/keep others out of the scene
* Arrest Offenders/Gather Witnesses

For the purpose of this lesson we will assume that we are dealing with a non-suspicious death caused by something like a heart attack.

First Aid or Confirmation of Death

You must never assume that a person is dead, check for signs of life. (Ensure you wear protective gloves to avoid any contamination).

In most cases this apparent conflict in statements will cause you no problem. The body will be cold, eyes may be still open, and other indicators will tell you that an ambulance is not required.

In cases where it is apparent that the death was not recent, that is, the body is decomposing, an MPS FME is to be called. An ambulance will NOT be called.

Even if it is obvious that the person is deceased the death needs confirmation by an appropriate person.
Confirmation of death, referred to as Pronouncing life extinct requires one of the following four groups of professionals;

- Ambulance staff and Paramedics.
- Forensic Medical Examiner (FME).
- Doctor (GP).
- Appropriately trained Nurse including Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) Custody Nurse

The persons own doctor may attend but they are under no obligation to do so in which case an FME will attend. The confirmation of death is termed 'life pronounced extinct'. Remember you must record the name of the medical person confirming the death, their title (doctor, paramedic etc), and the time it was confirmed and any relevent information they give you.

Try to establish the name of the family doctor. You may find a note book by the telephone or other documents which may provide this information. If the deceased has been treated recently, the illness or disease may be contributory to the death and therefore the family doctor may issue a death certificate.

Now call for:-

* A Supervisor i.e. a Sergeant who must attend the scene and direct the investigation as appropriate.
* The Duty Officer,
* The CID,
* The doctor,

Once the doctor has arrived to pronounce life extinct, you can then request that the Coroner’s Officer be informed.

While you are waiting for the assistance, start the next stage.

**Investigation**

The Officer taking the initial report is the Initial Investigating Officer (IIO).

The matter must be reported in an Evidence and Actions Book and you should start to record details immediately.
Note the description of the body in detail, including clothing, colour of eyes, hair etc. You should be able to identify the deceased to another person from your description. This may include attending a mortuary to identify the deceased to the pathologist.

Establish the person’s name and friends or relatives. They will need to be informed later of the death. Have a good look for ANY correspondence, letters, diaries, address books etc., that will assist in tracing friends and relatives.

Check the body to ensure your initial assessment was correct. Look for bruising, wounds or other suspicious indications. You will need to roll the body over and check all over the body to be satisfied. If you are in any doubt at all you must bring this to the attention of a Sergeant, CID Officer, or FME/Doctor.

Beware of your health and safety when you handle the body. There may be infections or infestation. Use gloves and ensure that you observe good hygiene.

Record the position of the body and a brief description of the room. Note the condition of the room and any pills, bottles lying around. These are all details that may be of use in an inquest as to how that person came by their death.

Make a note of the time you called for the assistance you requested, the time they arrive and who they are and when they leave.

**Removal of the Body**

Generally speaking the Coroner, who is legally and/or medically qualified, is concerned with deaths requiring investigation, they are assisted by a Coroner’s Officer.

The deceased person's doctor may issue a death certificate if they have treated the victim for an illness which was the cause of death, i.e. cancer treated within the previous fourteen days.

However, where Police are involved, the Coroner’s Officer will always assist in the arrangements to remove the deceased, so all that will be required from you is to inform the Coroner’s Officer and act on their directions.

The Coroner’s Officer is the expert and will, if asked, advise Police and relatives about any matter in connection with death.
Protection of the Deceased's Property

Many legal battles arise over the property of a deceased person and disputes arise over wills. These arguments generate extreme bitterness and sometimes false allegations against any person involved.

You **must** record all property you find in your Evidence and Actions Book and should try to obtain a witness while you do so. Your trainer will give you guidance on this.

Remember, while you are checking property, look for clues as to the addresses and identity of friends or relatives.

Valuables such as cash, watches, jewellery, cameras etc., will be taken to the Station for safe keeping.

Cash found in packets or envelopes should be recorded in separate amounts with a note of where it was found, each denomination of £1 and above, must be listed. Other small change amounts may be listed as a total. This should where possible be done in the presence of a witness.

If there are any large sums of cash, this should be drawn to the attention of the supervisor immediately as certain guidelines will have to be followed.

**Take only the property which is of obvious value**, to the Station, together with any important documents such as wills, bank books etc. Any property brought to the police station must be registered in book 66. You must state exactly what you are depositing at the police station in book 66, and any items must be separately itemised. If you attend where a person has hanged themself, you must take the rope/item used to the station.

This would include the key to the property. **You must not hand the keys to anyone who is not a relative, unless this is agreed by the immediate family e.g. Husband, Wife, Son, Daughter.**

Remember a Sergeant MUST attend every sudden death if there is any doubt their advice must be sought.

Property, furniture, clothing and other similar property should be listed briefly ie, “quantity of furniture found in front living room”.

**Also, you must seek advice about any letters you find, opened or not, and must bring them to the attention of a Supervising Officer.**

When at the scene of an apparent suicide it is important that officers make reasonable attempts to locate and secure any suicide note that may be in existence. Such a note may play a vital role in an investigation to the death and may assist the Coroner in coming to a verdict. Personal notes to loved ones often assist people close to the deceased in coming to terms with the death.
Any such notes, letters or documentation including scribblings that may appear to indicate an intention to die ie. a suicide note should be delivered unopened to the Coroner - they will decide as to its relevance.

In any case, make a note of the dates of posting from the post mark on any letters that you find as this may indicate how long a person may have been dead. Should anyone claim any property, contact a Supervising Officer for advice.

When the list of property is complete, ask your witness to check and countersign it.

The premises must be secured and locked before you leave. If you have damaged the door, lock or window etc., effecting entry, the Control room will arrange for necessary repairs to be made before you leave.

You will be required to report this damage using Form 9356, available on the intranet.

You should remain the point of contact for the family for any other enquiries they may have, unless the case is handed over to another officer. If you are due to go on a course or a period of leave tell your supervisor who can assign any more enquiries to another colleague. A bereaved person will already be feeling distressed and should be able to locate an officer dealing with the case easily.

If you return any property, you must as in all cases where you restore property record when, to whom and why in the book 66 register.

**Reporting the Incident**

This incident must be reported in an Evidence and Actions Book. The report may seem complicated because it must contain a great deal of information but this will be to your advantage if you are required to give evidence at Coroner's Court.

In addition, you must inform the Health and Safety Executive (by telephone) whenever you deal with a death in any workplace. This includes road traffic collisions where the victim is working, whether pedestrian, driver or passenger. They will investigate the matter as well, which may disclose a breach of the Health and Safety Law (which is criminal law) or Regulations.

If you made notes at the scene as you dealt with each stage, it will present you with no problem. Your Instructor will teach you how to complete the report.
The following list summarises some of the more important information the report must contain times of;

- Your arrival
- Time Supervisor (i.e. Sergeant) informed and time of arrival
- Duty Officer informed (and arrival if applicable)
- CID informed
- Coroner’s Officer informed
- Doctor informed and arrival
- Time life was pronounced extinct.
- Time deceased was removed
- Time you left the scene
- CCC informed
- Time relatives or friends informed

Other Information

- Description of deceased
- Method of entry into the premises
- Any damage caused by the entry and how the premises were secured when you left
- Property list

MERLIN.

*All Sudden Deaths must be recorded on the MERLIN System.*

Unidentified Bodies

If the body is not able to be identified, the IIO must complete an 'UNIDENTB' report on MERLIN. The IIO must conduct all relevant early enquiries to attempt to identify the person. They must ensure that the details of the incident are circulated on the PNC using the 'Circulate to PNC' button on the 'PNC + Reports' page of MERLIN. A descriptive UNIDENT Cross-match search must be made on MERLIN at an early stage to see if anyone matching the deceased's description is currently recorded as a missing person.
Further descriptive searches may need to be made at a later stage. If the MERLIN system is unavailable, an MSS 'UNIDENT' message must be sent to ensure the details are transferred to the PNC. The IIO will then inform the designated Investigating Officer (IO) who will then become responsible for further enquiries.

**Sudden Deaths where Next of Kin (NoK) not informed**

The IIO will complete a 'SUDDEATH' MERLIN report. If the death is non-suspicious, the IIO must ensure that the details of the incident are circulated on the PNC as above. The IIO must then inform the IO in person who then becomes responsible for conducting further next of kin enquiries.

**Sudden Death where identity of deceased known and NoK informed**

The IIO will complete a 'SUDDEATH' MERLIN report and ensure the NoK details are recorded in the 'Other Roles' screen. PNC Circulation is not required in these cases. These are record only cases and do not require the appointment of an IO.

**Informing relations or friends**

It will almost certainly become your task at some time to give the sad news to the Husband or Wife, Son or Daughter, Mother or Father or perhaps a close friend, of a person who has just died.

The first simple rule is that such news **must be passed in person, never by telephone.**

Whatever happens, when dealing with a sudden death, it is the responsibility of police to trace and inform any relatives or friends. Therefore, every effort must be made to contact someone. When supplying MetCall with details for a 'death message' to be delivered, it is **important** that officers supply a contact phone number and details of when they will be available to be contacted. You, as reporting officer, **must** liaise very closely with the Coroners Officer particularly if there are difficulties. The Coroners Officer may be able to assist you with your enquiries.

You should also consult a supervising officer.

Before informing anyone:-

(a) **obtain all possible details about the death, including present location of the body and how relatives can arrange to view the body.**

(b) **obtain as much information about the relationship and whether the death was expected.**
Clearly, in accident cases it will always be a horrible shock;

(c) obtain information about the individual who is to be told. Is he/she elderly, infirm living alone?

(d) Whenever possible have another Officer with you.

It may be totally impossible to have another officer with you, in which case consider whether to deliver the message and then offer to contact someone of their choice once the news has been given.

If you chose to have another person with you (neighbour, friend etc) be aware that the bereaved person may not like the person that you have chosen, and may question why someone else was informed of the death before them.

Consider things like getting the person to sit down, making them a cup of tea or coffee, etc. If you give telephone numbers for the person to contact someone (a hospital or other police force) make sure you include the correct dialling code for that number as the person may be too shocked or confused to do it for themselves.

Write information down for them such as telephone numbers, location of the deceased and brief details of what had happened. People may ask about viewing the body. It is their choice if they wish to do this, it is not your responsibility to encourage or discourage this. Consider medical aid, especially with the elderly.

Lastly be prepared to deal with different reactions to the news you have just given. This can be distress, disbelief, shock, anger, denial, cold detachment, numbness or even relief. Also be aware that some of the feelings described above, may be directed towards you either verbally or physically.

Many officers find themselves with the unenviable role of informing a family that their loved one has died. This can be a daunting message to give and the way it is delivered can have a massive impact on the next of kin.

A new service aims to provide fast time advice on issues such as the best way to tell someone, what shouldn’t be done, how to deal with children being present, how to deal with grief reactions of the family member and cultural and religious considerations.

A telephonic aid memoir will provide 24-hour guidance through pre recorded advice that officers can access via phone prior to notifying next of kin of the death.

The 24-hour advice can be accessed on 0800 032 9990.

If you should find a Will at the location, it should be taken back the police station.
Sometimes the Will may be sealed in an envelope with solicitors details on - this will be particularly useful if you are not able to locate any next of kin. Should you find a Will at an address, and no next of kin are known for the deceased person, this should be mentioned to the Coroners Officer with whom you speak. It may be that they will instruct you to open the Will to try and ascertain next of kin details.

Once held at the Police Station the Will should not be released without the authorisation of the Coroners Officer.

Work - place Related Death

If you attend the scene of a sudden death, which appears to be work-place related, when you contact your control room in addition to asking for other assistance ask them to inform the Duty Officer that you think it is work related. The Duty Officer will attend and direct the initial action.

Sudden and Unexplained Infant Deaths

Dealing with a sudden death is traumatic enough for anyone either connected with the deceased person or dealing with the incident. When the death is of an infant, then it can be even more traumatic, for all concerned. You need to demonstrate compassion and understanding throughout the incident.

“Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy” (SUDI) formerly known as 'Cot Death' or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), is the death of a baby or infant up to the age of two years in sudden, unexpected and unexplained circumstances. It is a cause of death which is given after every other cause has been excluded and determined at the inquest. The vast majority of these deaths are tragic family events with the reason found to be natural causes.

This section describes the action you should take when dealing with this particular sudden death, the overriding factor is the high level of sensitivity you need to adopt and to maintain a difficult balance with the investigation of what in reality could be a serious crime.

The MPS takes the investigation of these incidents very seriously and there is a specialist department who have the sole responsibility for the investigation of SUDI whether the incident is suspicious or not. They are Specialist Crime Directorate 5 (SCD5).

The officers at SCD5 will be informed immediately of the incident by your CCC and will appoint an experienced Detective Inspector from their department to attend and take over the investigation. Until they are in attendance you have certain responsibilities to ensure they can carry out a thorough investigation.
Attending the Scene

The first officer on the scene of a sudden death inevitably reports the incident, but this would not be your first consideration.

The overriding priority at the scene is the preservation of life.

Your skills at ELS may be needed. If an ambulance is already on scene and the infant is being taken to hospital, a police officer at the scene should accompany them for continuity purposes.

If there is no ambulance present already, find out if one has been called, if there is doubt ensure one is called. You need not call an ambulance if a doctor, probably the family GP, is already at the scene and has pronounced life extinct.

Remember, although the GP has pronounced life extinct, they may not issue a death certificate.

The Forensic Medical Examiner (FME) need not be called unless the circumstances become suspicious.

Remember, it is normal for the family to want to hold their child and unless there are serious concerns that the infant has died in suspicious circumstances, this should be allowed. However, this must be supervised.

You must inform the Duty Officer immediately. They will attend the scene and should make all the necessary decisions. When the Duty Officer arrives you must be in a position to fully explain the circumstances to them. This is to ensure that the parents of the infant or other family do not get upset further by repetitive questions.

Therefore you must consider the following:

You must look for evidence of any injury or serious neglect to the child.

You have the unfortunate task of making a good visual check of the babys' body and immediate surroundings. Is it obvious to you that the child has been moved since the discovery? The first reaction of a distraught parent may be to pick up the child. Was the baby picked up, put down again, but in a different position? You need to find out because research has shown that sometimes the way a baby is laid in it's cot can have a bearing on the cause of death.
Don’t forget to note the reply and your observations.

Pay particular attention to the surroundings of the child. What are the hygiene conditions like? How about the bedding and is the child in a proper cot? What are the general room conditions like; temperature, dampness and cleanliness? Are there any signs of food etc?

Be very, very careful however, any neglect must be apparent and don’t confuse neglect with levels of poverty, even in the poorest of families a baby can, and will be, loved and well cared for!

**Remember Forensics:**

Consideration must be given to forensic issues. Scene preservation must be considered and items such as the child’s nappy, bedding and clothing should not be disposed of but be retained for examination.

**Reporting the Incident**

You will make a report of the sudden death in an Evidence and Actions Book.

**Bereaved Parents and the Police**

What follows is reference material it is a reproduction of a booklet compiled by an organisation called "The Compassionate Friends". It deals with the subject of police officers dealing with bereaved parents and contains very practical advice on this sensitive subject.

You will note that there are references to 'Cot Death' contained in this booklet. This term is no longer in use and the term Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI) is now used. The advice contained in the booklet however, remains the same.
Bereaved parents and the police

The Compassionate Friends
An international organisation of bereaved parents offering friendship and understanding to other bereaved parents.

PATRON: THE COUNTESS MOUNTBATTEN OF BURMA
FOUNDER: THE REV. DR SIMON STEPHENS

With thanks to The Compassionate Friends for their permission to use the booklet.
Breaking the news

One of the most difficult and distressing tasks facing a police officer will be to break the news of a child’s death to the parents. Inevitably this will come as a shock to the parents, as the result of an accident or some other kind of incident; the parents will be totally unprepared, and the police officer may have to cope with disbelief, shock, anger and grief from one or both parents.

In 1989 a county police force invited members of The Compassionate Friends to participate in its training courses for police officers. The Compassionate Friends is an organisation of bereaved parents; the child (or children) may have been of any age, including adult, and death may have been from any cause - illness, accident, murder and suicide. It was felt that a member of TCF could offer a deeper insight into the handling of these difficult situations.

Before taking on this task, The Compassionate Friends invited members to write about their experiences, both good and bad, when the police had to give them the dreadful news of their son or daughter's death, and some of the points made below are drawn from those contributions.

Though the police recognise that when they are called to a sudden death they will need to be alert to the possibility of a crime, this may be the last thing in the parents’ minds, so sensitivity is called for in both words and actions when enquiries are being made.

Sometimes police officers speak first to a neighbour to confirm that they are approaching the right family, or to gain information about the family in order to decide how best to break the news. If this needs to be done, it is not wise then to allow the neighbour to accompany you to the parents. They may not know one another well or, even if they do, they may not like each other. Perhaps it is better to ask the parents later if they would like a particular neighbour or friend to be informed.

Police officers should introduce themselves when they call, explain that they are bringing bad news and ask if they may come in. The parents should then be told gently, but clearly and directly, that their child has died. Where possible this should be in private and with everyone sitting down. While it is not helpful to use euphemisms, it is also unhelpful to be too detailed in explaining what has happened, especially in the early stages. If you do not know the answers to their questions, tell the parents you will find out and let them know - and then do so.
Tell them together

Wherever possible, the parents should be told together. Sometimes the father is told on his own, in an effort to ‘protect’ the mother, but this rarely does anything but add to the distress of both parents.

Some parents may welcome a little time on their own after you have told them, others may welcome your presence and practical support - a cup of tea or coffee, is there anyone you can telephone for them (relatives, doctor, clergy)? Do ask.

Other children in the family need consideration. Avoid frightening younger children, or over-burdening older ones (“Be a man”, or “Your parents need you to look after them”). This can cause them to bottle up their own grief, leading to more difficult problems later on. If there are children at school and the parents feel unable to go and collect them, perhaps you can telephone the school or a friend and arrange for the children to be brought home, without telling them that their brother or sister has died.

Write down any information or details you are giving the parents; most people are very shocked at this time, and memories become unreliable in a crisis. Leave your name and telephone number clearly available for them, they will certainly want to ring and ask questions later. Let them know your shift times. It is worth noting that while some practical details are hazy or missed altogether, nearly all parents recall vividly (even years later) the emotional response of the police officer. Some even remember verbatim what was said at the time.

Do ensure that a parent is not left alone when you leave the house, unless they specifically request this; even then it may be wise for an officer to check later.

Identification

If the parents have to go to identify their son or daughter, make sure they do not have to drive themselves; they will need transport home again after the identification. It is best if a relative or friend can drive them. Unless there is any evidential reason, allow both parents to see, hold, touch their child if they want; they may not know that they can do this and be afraid to ask, so do let them know. Leave them to be on their own with the child if they want this.

If it is not necessary for the parents to identify their child, they should be told they can see him or her in the mortuary. This is best done by
appointment and after some discussion. Parents have the right to see their child’s body; most want to do so and are helped by having done so, but there should be discussion first, and no assumptions made. If the face, or parts of the body, are badly injured, the parents may still wish to see, and touch, some other part of the body.

Some Health Authorities have specific procedures regarding identification; one is available from the TCF office (address on the back cover).

Avoid ‘de-personalising’ the dead child by using such expressions as ‘the deceased’, ‘the body’, ‘the remains’. Use the child’s name, or ‘your son’ or ‘your daughter’.

The child’s clothes and belongings should be handled with respect. Some parents will want to have these things as soon as possible, but others might prefer to arrange for someone else to collect them on their behalf. Try to give parents notification that belongings are to be returned. Where possible avoid putting these into a plastic ‘rubbish’ bag.

Follow-up

Follow-up enquiries should, if possible, involve the same officers who have been in contact with the family; some families are glad to welcome ‘their’ police officer in for a chat.

If you are attending a cot-death, unless you have a very sound reason, do not separate the parents. Do visit the baby’s bedroom sensitively. If possible, police should attend in plain clothes and in an unmarked car. (Among cot-deaths, less than half of one per cent are non-accidental.) Explain that you are acting for the Coroner to complete necessary enquiries.

If there is an inquest, be sensitive to the seating positions in court; the parents should not have to sit facing the person allegedly responsible for their child’s death.

Remember that you are talking about the parents’ loved child. Perhaps they were drug addicts, drop-outs, or known to the police, youngsters with unusual hair-styles or clothes - nevertheless the parents are going to experience intense, devastating pain at your news. Avoid implying that he or she was no good anyway, and no great loss to society.

Avoid trite remarks such as “Keep your chin up”, “He/She’s in a better place”, “You’ve got other children”. These are very hurtful to hear.
**Compassion**

What is needed now is compassion, caring and concern; with these you can be a great support to parents at the most difficult time in their lives. Give them all your attention, and as much time as you are able.

It is hoped that the guidance given above will prevent instances of unhelpful police responses such as the following:

The news of a child’s death was given in such a roundabout way that the mother could not work out which member of the family the policeman was talking about;

The parents were told of their son’s death by drowning; this had happened some distance away, and the police had no other information;

A mother was told of her child’s death and taken to the police station from work. No-one went to tell her son who was at school. He was told by a neighbour in a brutal way and went completely berserk, locking himself in the house, screaming and banging his head.

**Helpful responses**

It is encouraging that members of TCF were able to record instances of helpful police responses, for example:

A policeman dropped in frequently after the death, to explain procedures and to have a chat. The parents found this very comforting;

The Coroner’s Officer showed concern, and gave good advice about not allowing personal details (i.e. that the parents were not married) to be published;

The policeman concerned kept in touch both before and after the inquest;

The police asked a clergyman to break the news of the child’s death. The parents found him compassionate and skilled, and were grateful there were no police cars, etc.;
A mother was told gently, then left with her husband (the son’s step-father) for a short time to absorb the knowledge. The police then returned to check that she was all right. Details were taken the next day. The same policeman kept in touch until after the inquest.

A mother was taken, at her request, to see where the accident had taken place.

Other bereavement organisations

The Compassionate Friends does not claim to be the only organisation to offer help following the death of a child. Organisations such as the Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths (cot-death), Cruse, the Samaritans and local bereavement projects can help, as of course can family and friends. Members of TCF, however, can say ‘I know. I know the havoc into which your life has fallen, I know the agony that is ripping through your heart, the pain in your whole being, I know the bewilderment and the endless questioning of “Why?” and the agonising “If only.” But I know too, because I have been there, that ‘recovery’ is possible and will come in time and with help. You will never be the same person again, your values are forever changed, your needs and perceptions too, but in time you will be able to live a ‘normal’ life again.”

Sufficient time

It is likely that at some time in an officer’s service, he or she will have to deliver news of the death of a son or daughter. We hope that this leaflet will then be helpful. We hope also that supervisors will allow their officers sufficient time to assist the parents after the message has been delivered. Most of all we hope that officers will not feel ‘unprofessional’ or ‘soft’ if they show genuine emotional response during or after this difficult duty, nor thought to be so by their colleagues and supervisors. A touch, a hug, a tear or some expression of humanity does not weaken an individual’s professionalism - it reinforces it, and passes another message which reaches out to say “I’m sorry”, “I care”, “I’m doing my duty as well as I can as a person”.

The Compassionate Friends is not a religious society. Its common bond is the death of a child (of any age). It is a registered charity with its national office at 6 Denmark Street, Bristol BS1 5DQ, and there are local groups in many parts of the country. The telephone number is 0272 292 778.
If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in this lesson and would like the opportunity to speak to someone in confidence, please contact the Student Options and Solutions Team (SOST) on internal phone 50707.

More detail about what the SOST can offer, can be found via the search facility on the home page of the MPS Intranet.

Just type the words 'student options' in the search box and under Human Resources, a link to the SOST page will appear.

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Lesson verified by Mary Dowding of CST HR3(7) - June 2010.