

Cultural Awareness When a Child Dies

1. Introduction

This guidance document has been prepared to provide professionals with a quick reference source when dealing with the death of a child taking into consideration cultural, ethnic and religious diversity. The key to meeting the expectations of all families is effective communication, whether it be in the palliative phase for expected deaths or in the turmoil of an unexpected death. Assumptions should not be drawn as to the requirements or expectations of a family based upon appearance, language or behaviour. Stereotyping can trigger an unnecessary and unintended chain of events which can have a detrimental impact upon what should be seen as a caring and facilitative process not to mention the loss of confidence in the professionals by the family members.

This document summarises the language(s) spoken and the key requirements and expectations of a number of faiths although the list is by no means exhaustive.

In writing this guidance it should be taken into account that children who die, who are resident in the pan Dorset area, and are members of a minority ethnic group, represent only between 5% and 10% of child deaths annually, i.e. two to four deaths per annum. With such low numbers, professionals do not become experienced and competent in dealing with families from diverse backgrounds hence the need for a simple reference document.

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3. Cultural Awareness

The palliative phase before the expected death of a child, should provide opportunities for key professionals to engage effectively with family members to prepare themselves and the family for the statutory processes which might follow, whether legal or clinical. When a child dies unexpectedly, the benefits of taking the child's body to Gully's Place with close members of the family, cannot be underestimated and allows police and health professionals to engage effectively with the family in the peaceful and confidential area that Gully's Place affords. To provide clarity and facilitate the wishes and expectations of the family, professionals should consider the following points: -

1. Identify the birthplace of the deceased child and parents including their culture to try to understand the family's beliefs around death and dying;
2. Identify the religion of the family and try to understand the implications of that religion on the family's beliefs around death and dying. The family's level of faith and spirituality might influence these beliefs;
3. Ascertain what language(s) the family speak at home and if they speak English, their level of comprehension. The family might feel more comfortable communicating via an interpreter.
4. Ask the family about practices surrounding death and dying that may be important to them, and what services or practitioners they would find helpful;
5. Ask the family members about any specific practices (including faith-based practices) that take place at the time of death or while a child is seriously ill, and how you might fulfil any needs in that area;
6. Ascertain the support systems in the family's lives. The Hospital Chaplain will usually assist in contacting people to support the family. In Bournemouth and Poole, support is available for Muslim families through the Imam;
7. Understand and appreciate the importance of treating each death individually based on the multitude of cultural issues that can arise and not using a blueprint from a previous experience;
8. Try to engage the family in a trusting, respectful relationship and in an open, non-judgemental manner;
9. Remember that families appreciate the comforting and caring approach, support and guidance provided at the time of their loss. What happens in the hospital while a child is dying often has lifelong repercussions and can impact the severity and healing of parental grieving.

4. Language and Death Customs

4.1. Bahá'í

Main language is English, but elderly (from Iran) may not speak much.

There are no special religious requirements for Bahá'ís who are dying, but they may wish to have a family member or friend to pray and read the Bahá'í scriptures with them.

While there is no concept of ritual purity or defilement relating to the treatment of the body of a deceased person, there are a few simple and specific requirements relating to Bahá'í burial and the Bahá'í funeral service, which the family will wish to arrange: the body is carefully washed and wrapped in white silk or cotton - this may be done by family members or by others, according to the family's preference; the family may choose to allow others to observe the preparation of the body; a special burial ring may be placed on the finger of a Bahá'í aged 15 or over; the body is not cremated but is buried within

an hour's travelling time from the place of death; unless required by law, the body should not be embalmed; it is buried in a coffin of as durable a material as possible; and at some time before interment a special prayer for the dead, the only specific requirement of a Bahá'í funeral service, is recited for Bahá'í deceased aged 15 or over. While it is preferable that the body should be buried with the head pointing towards the Point of Adoration, this is not an absolute requirement, and may be impossible in some cemeteries without using two burial plots. This is a matter for the family.

4.2. Buddhist

Members in the UK may speak several languages other than English, including Tibetan, Cantonese, Hakka, Japanese, Thai and Sinhalese.

Many Buddhists wish to maintain a clear mind when dying. There is respect for the doctors' views on medical treatment, but there may sometimes be a refusal of pain-relieving drugs if these impair mental alertness. This is a matter of individual choice. It is helpful for someone who is dying to have some peace and quiet, and it is customary to summon a monk to perform some chanting of sacred texts in order to engender wholesome thoughts in the mind of the dying person.

After death, the body of the deceased may be handled by non-Buddhists. In some cases a monk may perform some additional chanting, but this is not a universal practice. There are no objections to post-mortems. Preparation of the body for the funeral is generally left to the undertaker, but in some instances relatives may also wish to be involved. The body may be put in a coffin, or wrapped in cloth (sometimes white), or dressed in the deceased's own clothes. It may be surrounded by candles, flowers, incense, photographs and coloured lights, but this is a matter of individual choice and there are no hard-and-fast rules. The body is usually cremated, at a time dependent upon the undertaker and the availability of the crematorium's facilities.

4.3. Chinese (Confucianism, Taoism, Astrology, Christianity)

Cantonese, Mandarin, Hakka, Hokkien, English

All family members gather at the bedside. A Chinese Christian pastor is called to pray for and to counsel the dying person. In the UK this practice is also common among Chinese with no religious convictions or who are traditional Confucian/Taoist. Buddhists call for a priest/monk from a Buddhist association or temple with links to Taiwan or Hong Kong.

After death, undertakers handle the deceased. Some undertakers in areas with long established Chinese populations (e.g. Merseyside) are accustomed to Chinese needs such as embalming and the deceased being fully dressed in best clothes including shoes and jewellery. In such areas some cemeteries have a Chinese section. Burial or cremation may take place a week after the person has died. Friends and relatives visit the bereaved family, usually in the evenings prior to the funeral when gifts of money or flowers are given and help offered. Sweets are offered to visitors when they leave. If the deceased is the head of the family, all children and their families are expected to observe a period of mourning for about a month. Headstones may have a picture of the deceased. If the deceased is a child, parents usually do not want to visit the mortuary. A sibling or close relative would be asked to identify the body in the mortuary.

4.4. Christian

Christians in the UK may be from any ethnic group. Church services usually take place in English, (or in Welsh and Gaelic).

Those who are injured or distressed may wish to receive Holy Communion and/or the Sacrament of the Sick. The Sacrament of the Sick is not limited to those who are dying, but is part of the healing ministry of the Church. Other Christians may ask for prayer for healing with the laying on of hands.

The choice between cremation and burial can either be a matter of personal choice or a denominational requirement. In all cases, the wishes of the deceased's family, or friends, should be sought if possible. If this cannot be done, then Christians should be buried.

4.5. Christian Science

Christian Science has been practised around the world for over a century by individuals of various faith traditions, as well as by those with no formal faith tradition. Consequently, people of diverse cultures and languages practise Christian Science.

There are no specified last rites. Such issues are an individual/family decision.

Questions relating to care of the body should be answered by the individual's partner/family. In general, Christian Scientists request that, whenever possible, the body of a female should be prepared for burial by a female. The individual's family should answer questions relating to post mortem examinations.

4.6. Church of Jesus Christ of Latter - day Saints (Mormons)

Usually English

Members may request a priesthood blessing. A quiet private place is appropriate for the blessing

The Church takes no position on post mortem examinations. Church or family members will usually arrange for the body to be clothed for burial. Burial rather than cremation is recommended by the Church, but the final decision is left for the family of the deceased.

4.7. Hindu

In addition to English, Hindus in the UK generally speak Gujarati (most common), Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali or Tamil.

Most fatally ill Hindus would prefer to pray with a mala (rosary). A Hindu will appreciate being with someone, preferably of the same sex.

It is preferred if all Hindu bodies can be kept together after death. A dead body should be placed with the head facing north and the feet south. Cleanliness is important and the body can be undressed and cleaned, but the family should be consulted where possible. The arms should be placed to the sides and the legs should be straightened. The face should be pointed upward with eyes closed and the whole body must be covered with white cloth. Any detached body parts must be treated with respect as if they were a complete body. Post mortems are permitted, usually with prior agreement of the immediate family. The bereavement in the family lasts a minimum of two weeks during

which several rituals are followed. Hindus believe in cremating the body so that the soul is completely free of any attachment to the past physical matter.

4.8. Humanists (Humanism is not a faith. It is the belief that people can live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs).

English, or any other language depending on the individual's background.

Many humanists will want to have family or a close friend with them if they are dying, or the support of another caring individual. Some may appreciate the support of a secular counsellor or a fellow humanist. Humanists may refuse treatment that they see simply as prolonging suffering. Some may strongly resent prayers being said for them or any reassurances based on belief in god or an afterlife.

No specific requirements. The choice between cremation and burial is a personal one, although cremation is more common. Most will want a humanist funeral, and crosses and other religious emblems should be avoided. However, since many humanists believe that when someone dies the needs of the bereaved are more important than their own beliefs, some may wish decisions about their funeral and related matters to be left to their closest relatives.

4.9. Jain

Apart from some of the elderly, Jains speak and understand English. The majority in the UK are Gujerati speaking, but a minority speaks Hindi, Rajasthani, Tamil, or Punjabi.

If death is certain and there is nothing to benefit by staying in the hospital, the Jain would prefer to spend the last moments at home. Ideally, the subject would wish for mental detachment of all desires and concentrate on the inner self. Family members or others would assist by reciting text or chanting verses from the canon. As much peace and quiet should be maintained as possible.

There are no specific rituals in Jain philosophy for this event. Bodies are always cremated and never buried except for infants. Cremation must be performed as soon as practicable, even within hours if possible, without any pomp. Many Jains still pursue Hindu customs as a family preference. All normal practises of UK undertakers are acceptable if handled with respect. The family normally provide the dress and accessories for the preparation and final placement in the coffin.

4.10. Japanese (Shinto)

Generally Shintonists in the UK speak Japanese and English as a second language.

Dying Japanese will wish to meditate.

Generally Japanese would prefer cremation to burial. Funeral services are administered according to Buddhist rites.

4.11. Jehovah's Witnesses

Usually English.

There are no special rituals to perform for those who are dying, nor last rites to be administered to those in extremis. Pastoral visits from elders will be welcomed.

An appropriate relative can decide if a limited post mortem is acceptable to determine cause of death. The dead may be buried or cremated, depending on personal or family preferences and local circumstances.

4.12. Jewish

English is generally used although Hebrew or Yiddish are also spoken.

It is usual for a companion to remain with a dying Jewish person until death, reading or saying prayers. The dying person should not be touched or moved, since it is considered that such action will hasten death, which is not permitted in any circumstances. He or she may wish to recite the Shema.

The prompt and accurate identification of the dead is particularly important for the position of a widow in Jewish law. Post mortems are forbidden unless ordered by the civil authorities. Body parts must be treated with respect and remain with the corpse if possible. When a person dies, eyes should be closed and the jaws tied; fingers should be straight. The body is washed and wrapped in a plain white sheet and placed with the feet towards the doorway. If possible, it should not be left unattended. For men a prayer shawl, tallit, is placed around the body and the fringes on the four corners cut off. The Chevra Kadisha (Holy Brotherhood) should be notified immediately after death. They will arrange the funeral, if possible before sunset on the day of death, but will not move the body on the Sabbath. Coffins are plain and wooden (without a Christian cross). Someone remains with the body constantly until the funeral. It is not usual to have floral tributes. Orthodox Jews require burial but Reform and Liberal Jews permit cremation.

4.13. Muslim

Muslims may speak several languages other than English; the most common are Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati, Arabic and Turkish.

If a Muslim is terminally ill or dying, the face should be turned towards Makkah. The patient's head should be above the rest of the body. The dying person will try and say the Shahadah prayer (the testimony of faith).

Muslim dead should be placed in body-holding areas or temporary mortuaries, and ideally be kept together in a designated area (with male and female bodies separated). Post mortems are acceptable only where necessary for the issue of a death certificate or if required by the coroner. Ideally only male Muslims should handle a male body, and female Muslims a female body. The body should be laid on a clean surface and covered with a plain cloth, three pieces for a man and five for a woman. The head should be turned on the right shoulder and the face positioned towards Makkah. Detached body

parts must be treated with respect. Next of kin or the local Muslim community will make arrangements to prepare the body for burial. Muslims believe in burying their dead and would never cremate a body. Burial takes place quickly, preferably within 24 hours.

4.14. Pagans

Mainly English.

Most Pagans believe in reincarnation. The emphasis in funerals is on the joyfulness for the departed in passing on to a new life, but also consolation for relatives and friends that the person will be reborn. Disposal of the body may be by burning (cremation) or burial. Funeral services will take place in crematorium chapels, at the graveside or at the deceased's home. In some traditions, any religious items of significance to the deceased must be buried or burned with the body. Ritual jewellery, personal ritual items such as the Witch's athame, and the person's religious writings (such as the Book of Shadows) are commonly buried with or burned with the body. A wake (mourning ceremony) carried out around the body by friends and relatives is common in some traditions.

4.15. Rastafarians

The vocabulary is largely that of the Jamaican patois of English.

No particular rituals are observed. The dying person will wish to pray. When a Rastafarian person passes (dies) a gathering takes place where there is drumming, singing, scriptures read and praises given. Usual on 9th and or 40th night of person passing.

4.16. Seventh-day Adventists

Usually English, though there are a number of different language groups within the Adventist Church in the UK, including Filipino, Ghanaian, Russian, Bulgarian, Portuguese etc.

Adventists would prefer to have an Adventist clergyman or woman present when facing death. However, they would appreciate general prayers and other spiritual care from clergy of other Christian denominations if Adventist clergy were not available. Adventists do not hold the sacraments as required rituals; hence Sacrament of the Sick would not be necessary.

Cremation or burial is a matter of personal or family preference.

4.17. Sikh

The Punjabi and English languages are widely spoken and used. Swahili, Urdu and Hindi may be understood.

The dying person will want to have access to the Sikh scriptures where possible.

The five Ks should be left on the dead body, which should, if possible, be cleaned and clothed, in clean garments before being placed in a coffin or on a bier. According to Sikh

etiquette, comforting a member of the opposite sex by physical contact should be avoided, unless those involved are closely related. Deliberate expressions of grief or mourning by bereaved relatives are discouraged, though the bereaved will want to seek comfort from the Sikh scriptures. The dead person should always be cremated, with a close relative lighting the funeral pyre or activating the machinery. This may be carried out at any convenient time. The ashes of the deceased may be disposed of through immersion in flowing water or dispersal.

4.18. Zoroastrian (Parsee)

Zoroastrians almost always speak English. Those from the Indian subcontinent speak Gujarati and Iranian Zoroastrians speak Persian or Farsi.

Zoroastrians prefer to die quietly and without being disturbed.

In the UK, Zoroastrians are either cremated or buried. It is important to dispose of the body as soon as possible after due paperwork and prayers for the dead have been performed. At least one priest should perform these prayers which can last for about one hour, prior to the funeral. Zoroastrian priests can be contacted at Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe in London.

Reference

The Needs of Faith Communities in Major Emergencies: Some Guidelines – Home Office and Cabinet Office 2005

When a Child Dies Cultural Competency in Paediatric Palliative Care – Alberta Health Services, Canada