

My name is Graham Whyte, I'm an Associate Postgraduate Dean for Grief and Bereavement with NHS Education for Scotland and I am also a Consultant in Palliative Medicine at Marie Curie Hospice in Glasgow.

My session today is to deliver a workshop on whether health and social care professionals should attend patients' funerals. This can often present a professional dilemma, to health and social care professionals when a patient dies, as to what their role is in attending the funeral and also whether or not that would be appropriate to do so. As with many dilemmas there often isn't a right or wrong answer to this, but I think it is an important issue to maybe discuss and we're going to have a workshop on it this afternoon. It is also something that there is very little written about in the literature, so there isn't really a right or wrong answer to this. There may be positive aspects to attending a patient's funeral – it might be seen as a mark of respect to the patient who is deceased and also to the, to provide support to the family.

So, I think there are many positives, and in some of the literature it has been referred to as a behavioural expression of professional grief, as to reasons why people may want to attend. And then I think to counter that there can also be reasons that people may not want to attend or also might hinder attendance and I think that if somebody does not choose to attend a funeral, they can often grieve and remember their patients in different, different ways. Obviously, the time can be a big hinderance, I think, to wanting to attend a funeral – often funerals are at very short notice, so being able to rearrange clinics or perhaps get colleagues to fill in can often be practically impossible, and it may not actually be clinically appropriate to do so, so I think that needs to be taken into account.

I think, there can also be a body of thinking that perhaps once a patient has died that we have plenty of other patients that we should be looking after and devoting our attention to, however, I think there is also a recognition that our responsibility to the patient does extend to the family after their death and I think that support at that immediate sort of bereavement phase can be very important to a family and make a big difference going forward.

What are the ethical challenges?

I mean from an ethical perspective I think that you have to think about the equity argument. Some of my colleagues would take the view that you can't possibly attend every patient's funeral so why should you choose one over another? But I think the question of why we might be drawn to attend one patient's funeral over another is an interesting one and that is certainly something we'll be focussing on in the workshop this afternoon. And another question that often crops up is that if you are actually specifically invited to attend by a relative and they request your individual presence, does that impact on your decision whether or not to attend and that's something else we'll be looking to explore with the delegates this afternoon.

Are there any negative impacts?

I think as we highlighted earlier it can have a positive benefit emotionally to talk about these things but similarly some people might find it has a negative impact and if you can get emotionally overburdened by perhaps getting too involved in a patient and their family, so I think people need to be careful of this and the risk that could cause to burnout, and for that reason I think it obviously needs to be a very individual choice and people shouldn't necessarily be criticised if they feel it is not for them to attend a funeral.

Is there any research evidence?

Well, I think, certainly within the research there is a few papers, but I think some of the discussions have looked at is there is a gender difference in attendance, and they have found that females do tend to attend more than males. There is also some surveys that have looked at if there is a difference between specialties, and for example, the majority of general practitioners, palliative medicine physicians and oncologists have attended at least one funeral, whereas this isn't the case for the other specialties.

So I think you can see from discussing the perhaps benefits and the hindrances to attend a funeral there isn't an overall consensus or professional guidance as to what is the best thing to do, and I think it probably needs to stay that way as a highly individual choice. But I think whether or not we should attend a funeral should perhaps be part of a bigger discussion about death, dying, bereavement amongst health and social care professionals and I think if we can start to open that conversation then perhaps that would improve staff job satisfaction and hopefully emotional wellbeing as well.

The film was produced in March 2020 and can be found at www.sad.scot.nhs.uk or <https://vimeo.com/392432297>

For more information visit www.sad.scot.nhs.uk or contact supportarounddeath@nes.scot.nhs.uk

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