**NHS Education for Scotland**

**Talking about Bereavement Podcast Series**

**Transcript of ‘Supporting people around burial and cremation’ podcast episode**

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**Speakers:** Jane Matheson, Bereavement Services Operational Manager, City of Edinburgh Council (JM)

**LI:** Hello and a very warm welcome to the Talking About Bereavement podcast brought to you by the Bereavement Education Programme at NHS Education for Scotland. I'm Lynne Innes from the education team, and I'm so glad you've joined us today. In this series, we'll be opening up honest and thoughtful conversations about bereavement. I'll be joined by guests who’ll share their experiences, insights and the meaningful work that they're doing to support others through grief and bereavement. Whether you're a professional, a carer or someone with a personal interest, there's something here for you.

Hi again, and welcome to this episode of the podcast. I'm really pleased to introduce my guest today; we've got a great conversation ahead. And if you find this episode helpful, please consider subscribing, sharing it with a colleague or friend, and leaving us a review. Your support helps us to reach more people and keep these important conversations going. My guest today is Jane Matheson. Hi Jane and welcome. How are you today?

**JM:** Good, thank you.

**LI:** I wonder Jane if you would like to introduce yourself and tell us a bit more about yourself and how you've got to where you are in terms of your life and work.

**JM:** Sure. My name's Jane Matheson and I'm the Bereavement Services Operational Manager with the City of Edinburgh Council. I have worked for the City of Edinburgh since I left school and spent 32 years in the Registrar's Service registering births, deaths, marriages, civil partnerships etc. I was involved in the early inquiry stage of the baby ashes inquiry and at that point I had decided on a change in career and came to work for the Bereavement Service in 2016 as the Council's Improvement Services Officer for Bereavement and that's led on to the Operational Managers role.

**LI:** Okay, so that sounds like you've had quite a lot of different experience, obviously you've worked as, I'm presuming that means you are a registrar as well. Yeah,so you've worked as a registrar and then moving into this

**JM:** Yep.

**LI:** this service. And so that's what now about what, nine years

**JM:** Nine years, yeah.

**LI:** you’ve worked there?And what has that been like in that time working there?

**JM:** It feels like 5 minutes. It is incredibly, incredibly emotional. We've got a very, very supportive team. We have a large team. We provide burial services for our 43 council run cemeteries and graveyards. We run Mortonhall Crematoria which carries out about two and a half thousand cremations a year. And we run a forensic pathology service for the Crown as well. So we've got high, high amount of committed staff who they're here because they understand how important it is to have people working in the bereavement industry who care about the job that they do. And they understand that their job isn't Monday to Friday, 9 to 4:30. You will always get a member of our team regardless of what time of day or night it is if you need us.

**LI:** And that's, I, I wonder how many folks know that you know, because I, I think that it's almost, it's not a hidden service as such, but it's a very quiet, understated service maybe isn't it?

**JM:** It is. And I think until people don't know we're here, other council departments don't know we're here. They all know that the crematorium exists. They know that the, the burial grounds and graveyards exist, but they don't know that the team are here and the knowledge and expertise that they have and the support and help that they can give you. Whether you are planning a funeral, you're talking through funeral arrangements with friends and family or whether you have a funeral to arrange or whether you can't afford to arrange a funeral, whether you need to repatriate a deceased. We're here and we have all that knowledge and we're here to help.

**LI:** That's kind of really interesting. And I think when we spoke before you were telling me that you were telling me about, I think it was about registering tour guides as well.

**JM:** Oh yeah,tour guides, yeah.

**LI:** Yeah.

**JM:** So we, we have five of our city centre cemeteries are historic cemeteries, they’re in the Edinburgh World Heritage Site and we run a registered tour guide scheme for them. So we were finding that the upkeep was massive and the footfall massive as well. So we, we have a registered tour guide scheme now where guides pay us for a permit to be allowed to guide in Greyfriars, St Cuthbert's, Old and New Calton and Canongate Churchyard and that helps put some of the funding back into the upkeep of them as well. Greyfriars is the second busiest free tourist attraction in Scotland and it's,

**LI:** Oh wow.

**JM:** I know it's incredible. I think our footfall last year was verified at 2.5 million. So,

**LI:** And just out of interest,

**JM:** a lot of visitors.

**LI:** what's the, what's the top attraction, attraction?

**JM:** It’s the museum.

**LI:** Oh, right, okay so.

**JM:** The National Museum, yeah.

**LI:** Yeah. So that's so, so you're, it’s second behind that.

**JM:** Second,yeah.

**LI:** That's, that's, that's quite an accolade, isn't it? And are those cemeteries still in use, active use or are they historical cemeteries?

**JM:** They are historical cemeteries but there's an argument that they could be an active use because if you could prove ownership to a grave, you could have ashes interred

**LI:** Oh right.

**JM:** in any of them.

**LI:** Right okay.

**JM:** We don't have a system where we close them, so there is no space for coffin burials in any of them. But there is always the possibility of ashes interments there.

**LI:** Ah right okay. So they could in theory be used.

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** Yeah, how interesting. And so I suppose, I mean, this isn't one of the questions we've talked about but I suppose you talked about the baby ashes

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** inquiry, kind of, I suppose, stimulating some interest for you. How did that, how did that bear out then when you actually joined the team? Was it

**JM:** I think

**LI:** as interesting as you thought or you know, yeah.

**JM:** Yeah. And I think it was, it was helpful for them as well because coming from the background that I did, you understand the legalities of terms. You, you know what pregnancy loss means, you know stillbirth is, you know what the differences are, you know what options were available to people depending on what year the pregnancy loss was, you knew about the changes in legislation. And a lot of people in Scotland working in bereavement up until that time had very limited knowledge of legislation. There was very little training. A lot of the certification that was available and still is, is very geared towards English law and not Scottish law. So I found it, you were, you were coming into an industry that were keen to learn and keen to change and keen to know what should be happening and what shouldn't be happening. And it's been, yeah, it's been a wonderful experience I have to say.

**LI:** And what would, what would you say has been maybe one of the highlights of, of that of the last nine years or anything that's significant, maybe not a highlight, but something

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** that's significant for you?

**JM:** Well, massive significance is the, the change in legislation and the new cremation and burial regulations coming in. I think the feeling that baby ashes scandal came to light at Mortonhall Crematorium and a lot of people that were in our service were acutely aware of that. So the feeling that, you know, even within nine years isn't really a long period of time, but everybody is comfortable in knowing that everything here is now procedurally correct that it's not something that could happen again. And people are not ashamed to talk about what happened in the past and how they've been part of shaping the future.

**LI:** Nothat's, yeah. Excellent. So I suppose from a bereavement perspective, what do you do in your service or your team? What do you do to support people who are bereaved?

**JM:** Yeah, I think one of the most important things we do is we're able to speak to people and talk to them about their options for arranging a funeral. We've got time to sit with people and talk about how there are no right or wrong choices, that they shouldn't feel pressurised by what they believe they have to do. We can also spend time with people explaining how to check, how to find out what the fees are likely to be for what they want to happen. We can also help them fill out applications for funeral support payment from the Scottish Government. We can help them find a funeral director. We can talk them through ways to keep funeral costs lower, how to find a celebrant, how to purchase flowers if you can't afford, you know, the, your standard flowers through a florist, all that kind of thing. I suppose one of the, the most rewarding parts of our job is helping somebody arrange a funeral who doesn't want to use the services of a funeral director

**LI:**  Okay.

**JM:** and who wants to do everything themself. And we can provide as much support as they need in order to be able to do that.

**LI:** And would that be, I know you're speaking about Edinburgh specifically, but with that, do you know if that's the same across all the

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** different council areas in the country?

**JM:** Yeah, it should be

**LI:** Right, okay, right.

**JM:** because there is no legal requirement to use a funeral director, so you should have a bereavement service or somebody within your local authority that would help you make arrangements.

**LI:** Right, okay.

**JM:** It's very difficult. It's not for the faint hearted. You have to be a very strong person to take it on yourself. But some people need to, they just need to, especially if they've been involved with a lot of care at home, they're not ready to pass on that care to a funeral director. And a couple of cases we've had recently, the person themselves been involved in making those arrangements before they've died. So they've had quite a lot of interaction with the staff about what they would like to happen and how they would like it to happen. And we've been able to have conversations around…but the, I suppose if you're going to arrange a funeral yourself, one of the most important things is where you die and where your body is going to be kept and how your body is going to be kept until the funeral itself. And it's, it's easier when you have these conversations with people before rather than after.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. And, and are those conversations do you think, I mean, yeah, I wonder if those conversations are difficult for people to have before.

**JM:** I think, I mean, yes, very difficult for the people that are asking the questions and for the staff that are answering the calls, It's really difficult. But I think when you hear the team here they’re, they're explaining to people, I'm going to ask you some questions that are really difficult and they might be very hard for you to answer but I need to ask you them so that I can help you properly. And if at any time you feel I've had enough of this today or I just don't want to talk about it anymore, just tell us and we can call you back later or you can call us. So I think we'd spoken the last time that a very, very small team in the office, the office can be particularly busy. And you can get people phoning that have, that are very angry, going through an anger stage of grief. And sometimes that's not particularly pleasant. And we had suggested to the office team that perhaps we should have an answering machine that people leave a message and we phone them back. And they were absolutely horrified by that, the very thought of it. But they kept saying if somebody's ready and has lifted the phone, we need to be here. It's pointless having an answering machine because they're ready to talk now and we need to answer the phone. And if that means we get calls sometimes that aren't pleasant for us or are difficult for us, so be it if it means we capture the one person who'd needed us at that right time.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah. So it's kind of meeting people

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** at, at, you know, at that moment where they're, where they are, isn't it really.

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** Yeah,so, so important and, and really compassionate and kind of your, of the team that are working there

**JM:** Yes.

**LI:** to recognise that, you know.

**JM:** It is, it says it all for them cause’ it could be, you know, they could have their whole day planned out with sort of routine mundane things that need done like invoicing. And they'll maybe be stopped for an hour, an hour and a half on the phone, that, those other tasks don't go away they have to still, it means they're staying later but they won't speed up those calls.

**LI:** Yeah, it's a real kind of real, you know, I know it's a bereavement service, but it is a bereavement service, isn't it?

**JM:** It is, yeah.

**LI:** It is, isn’t it. It's not just about organising the funeral

**JM:** No.

**LI:** or, you know, the crematorium for, for the,

**JM:** Yes.

**LI:** for the, you know, for the actual service of cremation.

**JM:** It's about being,

**LI:** It’s more than that.

**JM:** yeah, being here and listening. And that's the same for, we get a lot of calls from charities, from support agencies, from social workers, you know, we’d be here, offer, we offer advice to midwives as well that you know, anything at all, any questions, you just phone

**LI:** Oh, right okay.

**JM:** or email us.

**LI:** Right. That's, it's really good to know that. And, and I know you mentioned there the funeral support payment

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** cause’ one of the things you often hear people talking about is the cost of funeral

**JM:** Yes.

**LI:** and how they can be prohibitively expensive. And, and actually, I think it's something that probably worries people a bit

**JM:** It does, yeah.

**LI:**  if they haven’t, you know, in anticipation of someone dying but you mentioned the funeral support payment there

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** by the Scottish Government. What does that involve?

**JM:** Funeral support payment’s available to anybody on a qualifying benefit and it, it isn't designed to pay for a, a complete funeral, though it can, but payments are about £1800 to £2000 if you qualify. And there are a number of funeral directors that can work quite well within that sum of money. But if you've got anybody that's worried about costs or worried about how they're going to pay for the funeral, again, that's, this is advice that our team will offer about how to think about what can keep your costs low, how you can have a funeral that nobody would be able to say, oh, they didn't spend a lot of money on that because you wouldn't know. So we can, we can chat that through with people and explain to them how funeral support payment works as well and direct them to funeral directors and direct them to the application forms for the Scottish Government that the turn around day time is 10 days for a decision.

**LI:** Oh, right okay.

**JM:** So it's very quick. It's a fantastic benefit.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**JM:** think it's, it is a worry when somebody dies. The cost and how you're going to manage that cost is a massive worry and just being able to talk to somebody makes a difference.

**LI:** And has that been around for a long time or is it fairly new?

**JM:** Funeral support payments about five years now

**LI:** Oh, right so it is quite new.

**JM:** but before that, that was the Department for Work and Pensions payment before it was devolved to Scottish Government. It was harder to claim, shall we say. Funeral support payments much easier to claim and it's, it's a bigger payment as well. It's definitely,

**LI:** Oh, right okay.

**JM:** yeah, it's been a great thing. But I think understanding, having somebody to talk to, to say, you know, you don't need to have, you don't need to arrive in a limousine. Lots of people arrive in a taxi. You know, you can do flowers yourself. Lots of people do that. The council, we have trained our own marriage officers to carry out funeral services. So we have council celebrants that are

**LI:** Ah right okay.

**JM:** about a third of the cost

**LI:** Right okay.

**JM:** of a celebrant in the open market. So we can, we can pass all that information on to anybody that's worried about the cost of arranging a funeral. And it just gives them more options and helps them decide what it is they would like to do.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. No that's, it kind of sounds like a really good service. I wonder if there's anything in that, I'm not sure there is, but is there anything that you could do, is there any way you can do this even better, do you think? Have you got, I suppose, have you got any ideas or you said, you mentioned improvement was in your title. I wonder, you know, have you thought about ways to support people

**JM:** Well.

**LI:** differently.

**JM:** We, the council's also responsible for carrying out funerals under Section 87 of the Burial and Cremation Act. So we have to arrange a funeral where nobody else would appear to be doing so.

**LI:** Okay.

**JM:** So these are cases where people have no next of kin or there is absolutely no recourse to any form of public funds and there is no money available, there's maybe no capacity for the nearest relatives to make funeral arrangements. So our team are responsible for organising Section 87 funerals as well. So they've put a lot of time and effort into making sure that if you have to have a funeral that's provided by the council. We have a contract with the funeral director in place and we provide a service, which again means that to anybody attending they would not know that this was a council provided funeral. We have our council celebrant present. We have a service for every single person, whether there's anybody there to mourn or not. And I think for the team, it's really important to them that we hold a service so that if we do locate any relatives in the future and they ask us, we can say, you know, your aunt died, we couldn't, nobody could find you. We had a funeral and we had a service. And it was on this date. And it's quite a high standard that we have now in Edinburgh. So quite proud of that work as well.

**LI:** And how often does that happen or is it a frequent thing or

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** not so much.

**JM:** We probably carry out between 40 and 60 funerals under Section 87 of the act every year.

**LI:** Oh right, okay. Right. So yeah, right. Okay. And how does that feel for people?

**JM:** People can become quite involved and attached to their deceased. I think if you're, if there's nobody else and you're dealing with a social worker or administrator or somebody that doesn't know the deceased. And as you start to look around to find information out for the celebrant and as you find out little bits about them, you become quite attached to them. And a lot of the time, if it's what, if it's a funeral you're organising yourself, you will attend that funeral as well. So it does, yeah, it can be quite sometimes it, it feels very nice that you've been able to be there and that a funeral has been carried out. But some, some circumstances are exceedingly difficult. Sometimes we deal with people who nobody can be at their funeral because of the lifestyle choices that deceased has made. And that it's too difficult for any relatives to attend. And that's quite hard. I think you have to remember that the team are there to make sure that a funeral takes place and not to judge how a person lived their lives. But yes, it's, you have to be very emotionally resilient to work in the industry.

**LI:** That's interesting, we're just, we, we have a, a kind of journal club, a book club in our team and last week we, we watched a Ted Talk actually by

**JM:** Yeah.

**LI:** a, a professor in New Zealand. And, and it was the title of the talk was Resilient Grieving. And she's written a book about resilient grieving. And this particular person, her own daughter had been killed in a car accident when she was 12. And so it came from that place, although she'd already been involved in resilience, but not resilient grieving. And, and, and I've just started, I ordered the book after that. I've just started reading it. But that kind of when you talked there about people who are, you know, resilient in their, in their response to these, these funerals where they haven't known the person, but actually there's still something that touches us about another life, isn't there?

**JM:** And you have to, and I think that's the difference. We, you know, our Chapel Officers, they could be in eight funerals every day. And if they don't feel some form of emotion at all of those eight funerals, they're in the wrong job. So it's a fine line between emotional resilience and being shut off to what's going on around you.

**LI:** Yeah absolutely.

**JM:** Because when you don't feel anything, you're definitely in the wrong job and you can't do the best for people. So it's a very fine line between becoming overwhelmed by your own emotion when you're dealing with other people's grief, but also still being aware and still being able to feel it so that you can help them properly. I think when you don't and you're completely unaffected, you're not in the right place.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. And I suppose that leads on nicely to the next question, which is about how do, how do, I suppose, how do you, but how do all of your team keep well in the job that they and the roles that, that they're doing.

**JM:** So they, they have regular one to ones, they have staff meetings, they have regular briefings, particular difficult days you will find that they've all you know, they'll make time to sit down together and talk about how hard a day it's been and what they found difficult. There's not one of them that isn't afraid to show their own emotion. It wouldn't be the first time that I have walked into the gravedigger’s bothy to find two or three people chatting with tears running down their face, especially if it's been a highly emotive funeral. And that's good for you, it really is because your colleagues are there to support you and you're not holding that inside. We've got telephone counselling service available to us.

**LI:** Oh, right okay.

**JM:** People do use it, but I'm not sure they use it as much as we would like them to. One of our baby charities that are local, they have always offered us the most incredible support and direct access to their counsellors, not just for staff that are feeling overwhelmed. It doesn't need to be in relation to a child death and they've always been a great support to us in that way. And staff have, have used that service before because you can speak to somebody almost immediately, there's no waiting. But definitely the support of their colleagues is what gets everybody through. And I think knowing that you've got support of your line manager and your manager as well, that you can have a day where it's actually just too much.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, I’m sure it is.

**JM:** And knowing,

**LI:** Yeah.

**JM:** yeah, a safe enough space to say today, I can't do that anymore. I just need a, a break. That's key to everything is recognising when you need to have some time out.

**LI:** So sounds like a, a very supportive environment and culture that you're, you're creating there and, and for yourself do you get a kind of a support from outwith

**JM:** Yes.

**LI:** your, your team

**JM:** Yes.

**LI:** as well?

**JM:** Definitely, I'm part of the team. We, we sit and talk. We've had a bad day today. When I go downstairs on my way out, I will be sat down there for a good 15 minutes with the three cremator technicians that are there. And we will all be discussing our bad day,

**LI:** Right.

**JM:** until it's, until it's no longer a bad day when we leave.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It's been really great talking to you, Jane. It's so interesting hearing, and really, when I spoke to you before, I really enjoyed hearing about all the, the different areas of work. And cause’ I think I thought it was naively and I'm going to say just crematoriums and I know there's no such thing as just but, but I didn't realise the extent of the work that you're doing. I suppose before we finish, I just want to check was there anything else you would like to have said that we have not covered?

**JM:** Oh, I could probably talk to you for hours and hours on end. But I think the most important thing is that we, we have an open-door policy that's for members of the public, members of the industry, NHS employs, anybody who's really, if you have to speak to anybody about death at your work, come and come and see us. Come and see round the crematorium, come and see how the process works. Come and have a look at how a burial is organised. Come and meet the team. And I think when you know what the next stage is and what's going to happen, it's much easier to answer questions for people

**LI:** Yeah

**JM:** that have fears and doubts and worries. And also coming to meet the team, you might remember them and be able to point somebody in their direction in the future. And that's really, you're right, you’re saying it's a service that people don't know about. You don't know about it till you need us. And sometimes,

**LI:** Yeah.

**JM:** sometimes it's too late. So the

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**JM:** more people that do know in advance, the better.

**LI:** In my role, we talk a lot about, you know, relationship building and how relationships are everything. And actually, that's what

**JM:** Yep.

**LI:** you're describing there just now is building that relationship with a team of people. So that when you do, when we do need the services

**JM:** Yep.

**LI:** of your team, it isn't in a reactive way that we're kind of having, you know, we're, we're encountering you. It's much more prepared in lots of ways, if you can be prepared.

**JM:** Yes, you know where, you know where

**LI:** Yeah.

**JM:** to come and you know that we're here and that we can go and find out information that you may need and we may be able to help.

**LI:** So thank you so much. It's really been a pleasure chatting to you and hearing all about the work that you do. And I did, I think after I spoke to you last time, I had a wee Google of you and I noticed that you had won an award at some, maybe a few years ago now was it? And I was, yeah, so that was very impressive. Well done.

**JM:** Don't give up. That's what it is

**LI:** Yeah, I know.

**JM:** don't give up. And I suppose that's, I was always embarrassed about that because that's the whole team that were doing that. We're all like that. You know, you want to do the best for the people that you're here to help. And we don't give up. None of us give up. So that was just, yeah, I always feel a wee bit, there was more to it than just me

**LI:** Yeah.

**JM:** to be honest.

**LI:** There always isn't there. There's always a team of people behind

**JM:** Yes.

**LI:** every

**JM:** Yes.

**LI:** kind of one person that stands up.

**JM:** Yes.

**LI:** But there is always a team of people, you know, making these

**JM:** And,

**LI:** things happen.

**JM:** and we’re all a bit like that, we’re a bit determined if somebody says that can't be done, we're all a bit, watch me.

**LI:** Yeah. So thank you again and thanks for joining our podcast. Bye, bye just now.

**JM:** Thank you.

**LI:** Bye, bye.

**JM:** Thanks, bye, bye.

**LI:** Bye.

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