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**Talking about Bereavement Podcast Series – Transcript of ‘It's not another funeral, it is the most important funeral’ Podcast**

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**Speaker**: Paul Cuthell, Funeral Director, Thomas Cuthell & Sons

**LI:** Hello and welcome to talk, the Talking About Bereavement podcast, which is brought to you by the Bereavement Education Programme in NHS Education for Scotland. I'm Lynne Innes, one of the educators in the team and in these podcasts, I'm going to talk about bereavement with our guests who will be sharing and reflecting some of the work and learning they're involved in as they talk about bereavement.

**LI:** Hi and welcome to this episode of the podcast and I'm delighted to introduce my guest today, Paul Cuthell. Paul Cuthell is a, a director at the funeral directors, Thomas Cuthell & Sons. Am I right in thinking you're from Falkirk, Paul?

**PC:** Yes, you're correct Lynne…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …our head office is in Falkirk. Our, our family roots are in Bo’ness, but really across the, the Forth Valley area is, is…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …where we, we serve the bereaved.

**LI:** So Paul, nice to, to meet you today and have a chat with you. I wonder if you would like to kind of tell us a bit about yourself and, and how you came to be in this line of work, if that's okay.

**PC:** Yeah, absolutely, Lynne. So I, our family business now goes back 120 years.

**LI:** Oh wow.

**PC:** I've been in the business since the mid 1990s, I started off with a little Saturday job and then progressed on to the role of assistant funeral director and head of the memorial department and then trainee funeral director and eventually worked my way through to, to where I am now. So we care for the bereaved. As I said a moment ago, across the kind of Forth Valley area, we have four, four offices. We're a fairly small business. There's my sister and my cousin in the business and we have another two funeral directors and alongside us a big team supporting us. You know, we'll, we'll have assistant funeral directors, administration staff, embalmers and all totalling somewhere around about 30 people in total once we…

**LI:** Oh right.

**PC:** …get to our, our part time staff who would, who would come in and assist on the day of a funeral when we need drivers etc. So that, that's, that's a little bit about us. I do some work with the National Association of Funeral Directors as well. So they, they have members across the UK basically. I'm primarily involved in any FD Scotland, but I have served at national level. I was the, the national president back in 2014, 2015 and now more focused on the, on the work that we do here in Scotland, which is, which is good, it's funeral directors coming together with a united voice working on issues that are collectively affecting the bereaved families that we're trying to care for. So it's, it’s good that we can have that and of course subject to scrutiny by them having inspectors…

**LI:** Yes.

**PC:** …coming in to, to check us, setting out qualifications for us to undertake. Up until just the, the 1st of March actually, the funeral industry was unregulated. The Scottish Government have now introduced the Code of Practice for funeral directors and actually just as of yesterday, they've introduced the, the licence which funeral directors should be signing up to. So I'm pleased to say that I did that about 10.30pm last night.

**LI:** Oh, right okay.

**PC:** So there’s funeral directors across Scotland, now signing up for licences to practice as funeral directors. So that's good…

**LI:** Ah right yeah.

**PC:** …there's a further, a further emphasis on the importance of standards and quality and caring for people because there’s two trade associations, the National Association of Funeral Directors and Society of Allied and Independent Funeral Directors, the worst that they can do is expel a person from membership but that person can then continue to trade as a funeral director. So it’s…

**LI:** Oh right okay.

**PC:** …good now that we have something which the government have, have put in place, which actually mean that people cannot trade if they shouldn't be trading and not, not meeting the acceptable standards.

**LI:** Right, I, I was just thinking about, before you said that I had, I heard something about the funeral directors profession being regulated recently. But so that's good that you've said that. I take it that's probably been a lot of, a lot of work and, and a lot of time getting to this place where, where you were filling in your form last night at 10.30pm.

**PC:** Yeah, yeah. It's, it’s been a long time coming. So I, I think probably what started all of this was the very unfortunate Mortonhall baby ashes scandal as it became known.

**LI:** Okay.

**PC:** And that was where Lord Bonamy conducted his investigation and it was established that there were instances across the country where women were experiencing pregnancy loss very early term and the NHS Trusts were arranging the cremation and doing it with the best of intentions, but filling in forms in the hospital with, with a, a bereaved family. And they weren't fully understanding the options and, and the cremation was then just happening but because the hospital were dealing with it and not the families directly involved, ashes weren't being returned in those instances. And they've managed to completely transform the way that happens, that you can still have the option of a shared cremation through the, the hospital arranging that for you in that instance. But you also have the option of, of going and speaking with a funeral director to have something more personal if you…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** would like…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …to do that.

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** And that's led on from there to the Burial Cremation Scotland Act 2015, which brought about new legislation for cremation which has been very good. It's done away with the need for two doctors to authorise a…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …medical reviews taking place for about 12 to 14 deaths a day in Scotland. And it actually means we can bring deceased people into our care much more quickly. It means that we can bring deceased people to rest at home as soon as possible. So, so that's been a great system. And, and just again at the beginning of March, they did the same for burials and, and brought about a uniform set of documents for burials. Sadly, that at the moment hasn't gone as seamlessly as the cremation side, but it's a…

**LI:** Right.

**PC:** …work in progress.

**LI:** I suppose I'm just interested. You said you'd started working as a Saturday, it was a Saturday job. I'm presuming you might have still been at school or college or but what, what was, and I know it's a family business, but I suppose I'm wondering if you can recall that time, what was your attraction to, to kind of working, you know, doing that a Saturday job or, or coming into the business?

Yeah. So I, I grew up just death, death was part of everything in our family. You know, that the business phones would always be diverted to the home in the evening. My, my sister and I used to think that business was a person because mum or dad would say, well, that might be business when the phone rang, you know, and, and it was, it was a family that were calling upon us at whatever time it was…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …for someone to look after them. And I think it probably started off just with going along and summer holidays to help my dad go and put up headstones in the cemetery or maybe go down…

**LI:** Right.

**PC:** …and wash, wash cars and that side of thing. And I actually wanted to join the fire service. And then when I left school, I thought, well I’ll just get a summer job working in the business. And I did and that just led off, led on from there and I never ever did anything else. I regret not doing something else. I think it probably would’ve been a good thing. And my father was very keen for me to do that but there was…

**LI:** Right.

**PC:** …never an expectation for me to go into the business. I just found that when I started doing it, it was just a very rewarding job. And it was actually a misunderstood role…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …as well. You know, a lot of people will say when you tell them that you’re a funeral director they either say, oh, that's horrible, or they start asking you lots of questions and have all these preconceived ideas. But I've never seen it as a horrible job. We have a, a massive position of trust and people phone us and it might be two o’clock in the morning, it might be three o’clock in the afternoon. But they've, they've just lost someone who holds a very special place in their heart. And, and in most instances, thankfully, they've known that person for, for most of their life and they phone us, who are very often complete strangers and they ask us to come alongside them and to work with them and to bring them through that period and organise the last earthly thing that can be done for that person.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**PC:** And that's, that's a massive position of trust being able to do that and to build up that trust in that very short window is a special thing, you know?

**LI:** Yeah, it feels like a real, I mean, you talked about trust, but also, it also feels like a, a privilege to be alongside people at that time, isn't it really?

**PC:** It’s a massive privilege.

**LI:** You're right in their, their houses and you're, you're, you're along, as I said you're alongside them and that, that kind of, yeah, it feels, and that's right. I'm just recalling as you're talking my own experience of having, you know, the funeral directors over the years in for various times. And that's, there is there is never any doubt that this person is here to do the best for you.

**PC:** Yeah. I mean, I remember my father always told me and it was the same that his grandfather and own father had told him, that you look after a family the way you would want someone to look after you. And, and we always say to our team, there is no more important funeral that we are going to conduct than the funeral service we're doing this morning, because to that family, that is the funeral. To us, it's not another funeral, it is the most important funeral. And our reputation doesn't go back 120 years our reputation goes to the funeral service that we'll have at two o’clock this afternoon…

**LI:** Yes, yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …or whatever time it is. And if we, if we can't go out and treat that funeral like it's the most important funeral we're going to conduct, then we should really be questioning what we're doing. And I think it should be like that in any line of work. It's not just funerals, you know, there's, there's, there's, there's such a focus nowadays on automating services, you know, you know, phoning up call centres and pushing buttons and trying to get to the right place, going, going to the supermarket and self-service checkout, going to the airport and self-service check in and on all these different things but you don't talk to anyone. But that doesn't work when you have a bereaved family. They, they need someone to talk to. They don't want an answering machine. They don’t want a…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …click, click online here's your options, get a mail order type funeral or, or something like that. So I think it's one of, one of the last professions, I think, which hasn't become as, as automated perhaps as, as the rest of the world has. And I think that's a good thing. I think there's a lot to be said for coming alongside people sitting beside them and, and Lynne that was really apparent and I hadn’t appreciated that until we got to the time of the pandemic and everyone talks about COVID being a point that they looked up where everything was pre-COVID or post-COVID. And for us as a business, it was the first time we had ever had to say no to bereaved families. We, we decided very early on that it wasn't responsible for us to sit down in people's homes or have them coming into our, our offices to meet with us because we were in care homes and we were in private residences when people had died of COVID and no one knew how it was spreading.

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** And we could have then been the super spreaders. And we decided that we didn't want to have that on our conscience. So we went to video calls only. We’d never done a video call in our life but occasionally you speak, speak to a family over the phone and they were in America, but they were on a plane a day later or two days later…

**LI:** Yeah…

**PC:** …and then they'd come…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …and see you.

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** But you know, we started doing video calls, but we made a conscious effort to allow the family to stay in their own home. So we would send someone out each day and that person would go to each of our bereaved families and get signatures and forms, it was before e-signatures the, the, the local authorities weren’t as all as up to speed as…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …some of them are nowadays. And, and they would collect clothes for the deceased person. They would deliver ashes, you know, after a funeral and you would have to place a person's ashes on the doorstep and…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …press the doorbell and step backwards again and it was just horrible, you know, the, the limousines were all taken off the roads. Eventually they came back on the road with Perspex divisions put back in them but you were, you were, you were leaving from a family home and you were going to a cemetery or you were going to the crematorium and your numbers were at 20 and that that was all that you could do and families were being split right down the middle, you know, where the eldest child could come or the eldest…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …grandchild perhaps. And, and it was just horrible. But actually I was struck at that point, it was my, my own father's funeral at my father died in the middle of the pandemic, nothing to do with COVID, but we were one of those families that couldn't have a funeral. Everyone thought…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …it was people that had COVID or died of COVID. But he'd been a funeral director for virtually all of his, his working life. And it was as I led the hearse out of the street that day and we had a service in our service room in, in Bo’ness and then went on to the cemetery but we didn't tell anybody that's what we were doing we just publicised the route that we were taking…

**LI:** Right.

**PC:** …and, and, and the people that had come out and they had put suits on and they had stood by the roadside on, on a crisp September morning. And, and suddenly I realised we weren't alone and up until that point I'd been thinking, oh, we can't even give dad a funeral service the way that he would have done it for all these other families. And, and I'd seen all these families from the March through to the September where people stood by the roadside but it didn't impact upon me until that day…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …where I suddenly thought, we're not alone and this is what's important when you're grieving is having people around about you and having a support network that you can call upon. And it might be someone sitting having a cup of tea. It might be a, a minister or a priest that's, you know, come into the home and sitting reading the Bible and praying with you. It might be a celebrant just sitting talking to you, reflecting on someone's life. But you know these are important conversations.

**LI:** Yeah and I, I just as you're talking there I was, and it was September 2020, actually, my, my sister-in-law died not, not related to COVID either. And we had a 20-person funeral. And, and I remember that moment, that moment of impact was when everybody, she lived in a small village, and everybody in the village was out in the street ‘cause she'd lived in that village all of her life. And, and everybody was out in the street. And it was that moment that kind of took my breath away really. And you know that, that kind of respect that people…

**PC:** Yeah.

**LI:** …were showing to her. They couldn't come to the funeral, but they were they lined the streets of the village.

**PC:** Yeah, yeah.

**LI:** And it was very moving.

**PC:** Absolutely.

**LI:** Even talking about it just now, if I feel kind of moved talking about it because…

**PC:** Yeah.

**LI:** …I remember that impact of it.

**PC:** Yeah, yeah.

**LI:** And it was, it felt kind and it felt generous and it felt so respectful and like really valued this person despite the fact we were having a tiny service at the, the graveside, you know…

**PC:** Yeah.

**LI:** …that, that, that couldn't be what we might have hoped it could have been, you know…

**PC:** Yeah.

**LI:** …in other times. So, yeah and you must have been, well, you experienced that personally, but you were also experiencing it I suppose on a daily basis as well when you were, when you were doing funerals.

**PC:** Absolutely, absolutely. And you know, the other thing is you're talking about that I think what came from that was the live streaming of funeral services as well. Up until then, that never happened. You know, occasionally you would email someone a copy of the words that had been spoken at a funeral service…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …but live streaming just didn't happen. But it suddenly became the only way to allow the wider family and community to pay their respects. And it's been interesting how that's stuck. I mean, so much so we've, we've now put that facility into one of our funeral homes and we're about to put it into the other three.

**LI:** Right.

**PC:** And the, the families will quite often say to us, well, actually, it's not so much that there's people that we want to be here, we just know there's some people that won't be able to get time off work because people, people's lives have changed now, they're busier not everyone works in the small communities that they once did where they can get an hour off work…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …to pop along to a funeral service and, and the funerals that are being live streamed now and, and people then asking for recordings of that live stream to go back and share with other people. It's been quite a big shift actually to see just what's unfolded from all of that.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah. So you know we do a kinda wellbeing retreat and we talk about what are the good things from COVID.

**PC:** Yes.

**LI:** You know is there, is there anything good come from COVID because not all of it was bad…

**PC:** No.

**LI:** …and, and there are and it's trying to kinda look at the kinda some of the positives and that's I suppose one, that is a positive, isn't it yeah.

**PC:** Yeah, yeah.

**LI:** There are, there have been things. And I think seeing people's kindness and the love that they had for each other during that time was, was something that was really important as well. So in terms of what you do to support people who are bereaved, what, what is, what is, how does, how, how does that, what does that look like for you as a, a funeral director?

**PC:** So I suppose to members of the public they will see us on the day of a funeral service and they'll, they'll, they'll see a role as bringing a person's coffin to rest in church, bringing the coffin back from the church or bringing, bringing a family to the crematorium and then just being standing there and then waiting on the family to take them back for the catering or, or something like that. But there's a massive journey to get to that point. And very often, I suppose like, like the NHS, we're one of the first people that are engaged with that family. And that is in the immediate hours after the death. You know, if we have a community death, someone dying at home or in a care home, that we get the phone call straight away. And you know, if I'm on call, that phone call will come in at 1.30 in the morning and we will often be with that family by 2.15am, 2.30am or, or something like that and the deceased persons in our care. And at that time, they've had the palliative care team verify the death or, or if it’s a hospital death we wouldn't be attending just as quickly because there's often a mortuary setting in the hospital and the mortuary’s not open until the following day. But the GP’s not available in those small hours. And you know, the people that have had the care up until that point. So we're, we’re in there at that earliest point and that is our primary role is bringing the deceased person into our care for that family. And, and there are times where that family will say to us, look, we, we want some time at home with mum, is it okay to delay things and you come along in the morning and, and that's fine, we'll do that. But in most instances, people are really just not sure what to do. And probably we would be attending fairly quickly to bring someone into our care. And there's other things where those deaths are much more sudden and it’s perhaps a paramedic that's phoning us or, or it's perhaps the police that are phoning us…

**LI:** Oh right okay.

**PC:** …because the death's been unexpected, they've had to be notified and, and you know, they would view that as a death which isn't suspicious in any way. So they, they would say to the family that you can call the, call the funeral director, but make it clear to them that we need to have this conversation with the GP tomorrow to see if they're going to certify the death. But from there we then work towards a meeting with the family to understand their wishes and thoughts, but also to explain to them the, the different options. And that's a very intense meeting, you know, when I started in our business, that meeting was somewhere around about 40 minutes…

**LI:** Right.

**PC:** …occasionally running to an hour. I regularly find I'm now sitting with a family for somewhere approaching 2 hours and occasionally longer.

**LI:** Oh right okay.

**PC:** And, and that's starting off explaining to them about the, the legal side of things, registering the death and how that's going to happen and what documents will be issued and what we do with those documents and what the client should do with those documents. You know, banks and insurance policies and all of these different things. And then we'll come on to the funeral service itself and how we notify people that a deaths occurred and when and where a funeral will be. So you know we, we create an online obituary for, for people nowadays. If you go back 15, 20 years ago, that was always a newspaper, but less and less people are buying newspapers…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …nowadays. We discuss who will conduct the funeral service, you know, if, if the person had any connections with a local church and then it would be a Christian funeral service, for those who wouldn't want to, to do that, we'd have a non-religious funeral service and you know, we, we then whether we're engaging with that person or whether the family know who that person is and then where the funeral will be and when the funeral will be. You know, we, we need to understand are people travelling from overseas or is there hospital appointments we have to work around, when are we going to have the paperwork in place, when’s the crematorium going to be available or when’s the cemetery going to be available and then where's the catering going to be afterwards if that happens, is there to be any floral arrangements, has there to be service sheets, the music, the type of coffin, how the deceased’s to be dressed and cared for, if the family are going to come and pay their respects, all of those things. But in the background our team are then working to facilitate all of those things. So, you know, it’s not, whilst I'll discuss that with a bereaved family, the, the team in the background are then liaising with the florist and catering establishment and organising the printing of the service sheets for me and I've got my operational team then and they'll be preparing and furnishing the coffin and our embalmer will be looking after the, the care of the deceased and we need to get the clothes from the family before the family can come and pay their respects to, to that person. And whether that person's to rest at the family home or resting within our premises until the time of the funeral. There's the preparing the vehicles for the day of the funeral. The vehicles need to be washed and valeted every single time. You would think that if you wash your car, it'll be fine for a week, but unfortunately that doesn't work with us by, by the time we've been a half an hour journey to the crematorium and back again, there's just stuff all over the cars…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …or you know, you know, occasionally we’ll have a church service and go to the cemetery and the cars actually look okay, but then you look at them and there’s fingerprints all down the windows and things so there's all of that side of things. So there's, there’s a massive amount to get to the point of the funeral. And I think for us, we always say to our family that we recognise they probably don't want us to be there. You know, this is something they've always dreaded but...

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …and, and I said this to a family was a young lass died and, and I said that to that family, I said, you know, I know you don't want me to be here and I want you to understand that I don't really want to be here either but we can't change the situation that we each find ourselves in. But our role is to come alongside you. And I want you to tell me what your thoughts are because it's my job to worry about all of that and filter it back to you and let you know what our options are. But I don't want you to be anxious about things and ultimately I want to get to the point where when the funeral service has taken place, I understand it by a really hard day for you, but I want you to be able to look back on that and remember it for the right reasons because it's the last thing that we're going to be able to do for the, the girl that we were looking after. And it was a very personal funeral. It was a very different funeral that that family had actually, you know, they chose to have the service in the local community where that girl had grown up and lived her whole life. And, and actually they chose then to have the catering there straight afterwards. And we brought the girl back into her care. But they had an unattended cremation because for them they didn't see the point in travelling half an hour to the local crematorium to be part of a conveyor belt, so to speak because actually that's what it would feel like with three or 400 people, because they would have an, they would have so many people there that would be impossible to try and see everyone in the time limits that the crematorium have. So when we, we held the service locally, we were able to have that in a venue where we worked at times to suit ourselves. But actually, we conveyed the girl to the crematorium in the normal manner with our hearse and our staff in uniform and her ashes were returned to the family the following afternoon. And, and we kept everything in the town. But you know, there's, there's been a massive focus over, over the years, but more recently, I suppose, on, on having unattended funeral services and, and, and not actually having the burden of a funeral is what some people would say. But actually, it's not the burden of a funeral, it’s doing the last earthly thing that you can do for a person. And, and actually a funeral is personal, you know, and it's, it's…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …so that, that family had the unattended cremation but actually for them, having a personal funeral was what was, was more important, you know, and it was very interesting.

**LI:** And I was just thinking about when you were talking about unattended cremation and obviously there's direct cremation and how, how do they differ?

**PC:** Well, direct cremation is, is what I've just spoken about…

**LI:** Oh right okay so it’s very similar?

**PC:** …unattended they, they are exactly the same. And there'll be some people who will have the direct or unattended cremation. And it is as simple as they, they come and they meet with us and we fill in the legal forms and we bring the deceased person into our care and we convey the deceased to the crematorium and we return the ashes to the family.

**LI:** Okay.

**PC:** And that's the bare minimal. And there will be some organisations who will focus on doing that and doing it by telephone and correspondence and email. But actually there's a concern amongst funeral directors that that's maybe not the best way to be doing that, that people still need the face to face interaction, they still need to know that their loved ones being cared for in the local area. Because some of these companies will be larger companies that have an agreement with a crematorium in a certain part of the country and what they'll do is they'll wait until they have two or three deceased people in the one area and they'll leave the deceased person in, in the mortuary at the hospital until they happen to be in that area. Whereas for, for us, it doesn't have any bearing what type of funeral the family are having. Most funeral directors would say, let's get the deceased person into our care as soon as possible. And sometimes that family don't want the funeral service, but they want to come in and they want to pay their respects to their loved ones. So they might still do that, but then not have the funeral service or, or they might actually choose just to, you know, have the, the hearse come to the house and then leave from the house to go to the crematorium. But they're not going to crematorium, but they'll all stand outside the house in a way that we would have done during COVID. So there's, there's all manner of ways that it can, it can happen.

**LI:** It sounds like it's quite flexible as well. Like you're willing, you're, you're kind of we’ll do different things depending on what people want. And I know there's, I've seen stuff at funerals, kind of very different funerals where maybe the person was a, I don't know, say a big fan of motorbikes or something like that, and so it's a very motorbike themed funeral.

**PC:** Yeah, that's, that's right. It's, it's personalising a funeral and it's doing it within people's means, you know, sometimes you can have very elaborate funerals. You know we had a motorcycle hearse that, that came for a funeral service and, and there was outriders, you know, the chaps, the chaps friends were there and it was, it was lovely. But for other people that might be beyond their means to do that. But there's, there's nothing wrong with working with the family and having the outriders accompanying our hearse on the day of the funeral or, or there's nothing wrong with, you know, there's numerous times where we've had a cortege that we've taken past Falkirk Football Club, for instance, and we publicised that we were doing it. You know, it was another instance during COVID where one of the former players died. And it would have been an incredible size of funeral if we could have had anything other than invitation only. But we weren't able to, but we publicised the route we were taking. We went past the stadium and there was hundreds of people there. But it was done safely. And it was, it was, it was done in a personal way as well, because they could have just gone to the crematorium and not done that, but they wanted to mark the fact that that had been where he had played when he was playing in professional football. And actually…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …there was, there was the fans there that felt they wanted to do something and to rally round that family, you know, there's, there's all manner of ways that you can, you can do these things.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah. I, I was thinking about when you said like your visits might have taken about 40 minutes a few, a few years ago and now they probably take up to two hours. I suppose there was a couple of questions there. I was, one was I was thinking, why has the time extended? But also how, how is that for families? Does that feel overwhelming for families sometimes having, you know, that that, that…

**PC:** Yeah.

**LI:** …kind of length of conversation at that time when they're recently bereaved?

**PC:** I think it can feel overwhelming Lynne, I think it can feel very, very daunting. I remember and this is many years ago and I still see that family in the, in the town to this day and still speak to them and reflect back on it. But a little boy had died and I remember walking into the house and his mother was just inconsolable in the adjoining room. And she just, I heard her shouting, ‘I don't want to see him. I don't want to see him.’ And I spent those couple of hours with them and it was a hard conversation. And, you know, we, we manage those situations in different ways and there are sometimes that it's very evident early on that the family are not in the place where I'm going to be able to discuss all the intricacies of everything that we need to discuss. And I always make it very clear to them, we will make no decisions. And everything we discuss is fluid and can change. But there'll be sometimes that I don't go into the depths of everything because I know that that's a decision that doesn't need to be made today and that's a decision that we’ll approach once we've taken these baby steps to get to the right point. So, a massive point of what we’ll do when we go to a people's home or they come into us is, is we'll spend the first 15 minutes, before we’ve even got a piece of paper in front of us or anything, finding out about the deceased, you know, has this been quite sudden, has your mum been in poor health? Oh goodness me right, okay and, and what size of the family is there, is there just the three of you, oh, you've got a brother that's in Australia, okay. And, and is your mum from the town originally, has she always stayed here, oh goodness, right and where did she work about? And you'll have all this conversation, but they without knowing that they're engaging with you and they're actually then talking about the person. The person has become the focal point. And the funeral is not the focal point. But that is so helpful for us, Lynne, because that's painting a picture in my mind as to the type of funeral that may unfold. And if there's somebody from Australia, I'm going to have to either work out a live stream of the funeral or I'm going to have to work out when that person is going to be here. And, and if that, that lady was a very passionate horse enthusiast, you know, it may be that we want to mark that in some way where there's that be that we're passing by the local stables and we're stopping the cortege on the route or, or, or whether it is that we're having a horse drawn hearse or, or something…

**LI:** Yes, yeah.

**PC:** …like that, you know, opposite ends of the spectrum. But you know, all of that is painting picture in my mind as to the kind of funeral that, that might unfold. And, and I think to come back to your other question about why that meeting though taking two hours is, it's just what I've touched on and alluded to there is that funerals are now very, very personal. It's not that they weren't always personal, but if I go back to my grandparent’s times, people would rest at home and they would die on the Monday and the funeral would be on the Wednesday or the Thursday. And actually very often it was burial. Cremations were only really starting to gain traction and take off probably around the 1960s, 1970s was where it…

**LI:** Okay.

**PC:** …came, the shift and actually coming up to the kind of 80s and when I started, we were probably still doing marginally more burials than we were cremations whereas…

**LI:** Right.

**PC:** …now we're doing vastly more cremations, but, but funerals are happening on a shorter time period anyway. And very often you would have the local minister who would conduct the service and it would be a standardised kind of service and quite often the same kind of hymns that would be at the service and it was the same type of coffin. And actually people weren't as far-flung as they are nowadays and going off and doing gap years and all the different things that happen. So there's, there are so many more options. There have been cutbacks that have impacted upon time scales, you know, so if I look at, we had five registration offices closing in our area and there is now one in Falkirk. In their defence, they're still registering deaths really quickly. There are some parts of Scotland where it's much harder to get an appointment for a family to register a death…

**LI:** Okay.

**PC:** …but you know that, that has a knock-on effect. There's the local authorities have real challenges with the budgets that they're setting each year and as a result there's perhaps not as many ground staff as there once was. So you won't get as many burials per day in the cemetery. So there's all of those things are having a knock on effect and we find that if then people are saying, well, do you know what, we can't get the cemetery for 10 days, well Aunty Jeans on holiday so could we not just wait two weeks and have the funeral in two weeks time.

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** Whereas in the past, person died and it was expected that the funeral would…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …happen, you know, as quickly as that. So there's more, more interaction. You know, there's printed service sheets, there's recorded music being played at funeral services, you know, and there's all those different things. And you know, all of that can be pulled together very quickly. You know, there are still instances where I'll meet with a family and we'll arrange for the funeral to happen three or four days later. You know I remember when my wife and I got engaged, we were married and just slightly under six months. And I can remember my mother-in-law at the time saying, ‘oh, Paul, you can't do that, that's not possible.’ And I said ‘Susan, I have people that die on a Monday morning and I arrange their funeral for the Thursday.’ And I said they all come along with their best clothes on and they all have a church service and they all have a printed service sheet and we have nice flowers and they have a nice meal afterwards. I said, so if I can do that for funerals within four days for 200 people, I said we can do it with our wedding for just over 100 people. And you know it's true, it's, it’s a massive life event, but it's just a different life event.

**LI:** Yes, yeah, yeah.

**PC:** And actually it's our job to facilitate all of that, you know. So I do wonder if there's a bit of a shift coming again. And we touched on the unattended cremations a little while ago and we're seeing now people focusing more and actually, let's have the funeral in a time that suits us and let us and let's not just wait until the crematoriums got availability. You know, they're fairly busy that week and we can only get time at 9.15am and that's no good because…

**LI:** Yeah…

**PC:** …there's people coming…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …from Aberdeen.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**PC:** What we'll then do is say, well, actually, let's take the crematorium out for the equation. Let's have the service in our service room. And actually if you want to have the service at 7 o’clock in the evening, well that's fine because it's my building and I know the service room is vacant and, and you know, as long as nobody else wants to use it that evening, we'll just book the service room and we'll have the service at 7 o’clock in the evening and we'll convey mum to the crematorium the following morning. And her…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** ashes will be returned…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …to you and I do wonder if that's, that's where things could go next, is having funerals more centralised than all of this running about across a city or whatever else happens, you know?

**LI:** Yeah, I was thinking as you're talking that like, I wasn't, I wasn't aware of like the kind of options that you're talking about there. And it feels like there are many options for people and that maybe that traditional way of doing funerals where, you know, I'm just thinking when, when we had my aunt's funeral, we had it at half past nine in the morning and it was a total drag actually getting to Kirkcaldy that day…

**PC:** Yeah.

**LI:** …because the schools were all, we were meeting schools traffic. And I was stressed all the way there thinking we were going to miss our slot. We ended up sitting outside the crematorium for, for a good 15 minutes because we were there in plenty of time, more than enough time. But there was a bit of stress around that. And I know people didn't come from Edinburgh because they just couldn't get through in time. So…

**PC:** Yes.

**LI:** …I actually never even thought of saying, let's not have it at half past nine, let's look for a better time or let's not all go to the crematorium. You know…

**PC:** Yeah.

**LI:** …we can, we can do this differently. So it's actually really interesting to hear you, you kind of talking about that. One of the other things you said was something about having had, you know, that these are hard conversations or this, that was a hard conversation. And I suppose I know you, you've probably you've had training around being a funeral director in terms of the practical or technical aspects to that. What, what kind of training do you get to have these more hard or difficult conversations with people?

**PC:** It's a long, long time in the making. You know, when we, when we employ a funeral director in our business, which doesn't, thankfully, we’re at a point where most of our staff will be with us for a long period of time, but we're very conscious not to push that person into that role too quickly. Everyone learns at different paces. And, and you know, they'll start off by shadowing and eventually they’ll get to the point where they're shadowing and filling in forms and then they're doing a little bit of the talking and engaging and eventually they're conducting funeral services. You know, we still focus on having a funeral director meet a family at the start and be there on the day of the funeral so there's the continuity. And there are times that doesn't work. If I'm going off on holiday, I can't delay a funeral because I'm on holiday. So one of my colleagues will look after that, but the, the, the family will know who that person is going to be. But we try and have that continuity. But to get back to the point, we wouldn't, for instance, give that funeral director a very difficult and traumatic funeral to arrange or you know, for someone that's died in an accident or a very young person that's died. And equally, when that point does come where they need to do that, and thankfully that's not as often as, as it could be, we'll be very careful to make sure it's the, the right kind of situation that we're asking them to go into and that they're comfortable doing that as well. Because ultimately, we want that family to feel well supported and not understand that maybe that, funeral director’s not been in that situation before. So through time, you, you learn, you know, how I arrange a funeral now is very different to how I arranged a funeral 20, 20 years ago. And I still go out, and I’ll sometimes, I'll say something and I'll think if I phrased that slightly differently, that may have been a better way of explaining it and you reflect on it and we talk, we talk as a team, you know, we have a morning team meeting each day where we'll talk through every funeral service that, that we have at that point. And every deceased person that, you know, needs to be brought into care from the Royal Infirmary or, or perhaps needs to be washed or embalmed and dressed or the coffin needs to be furnished etc. And, and, and you will go through these but a lot of that is supporting one another and saying, oh, that must have been quite a difficult conversation for you. And what, what about that family? And oh, and I remember when I had that situation, this is what I did and, and things like that. We, we have access to a counselling network through the National Association of Funeral Directors, one of their kind of trade suppliers that we can…

**LI:** Ah right.

**PC:** …ask the team to call upon but…

**LI:** Right.

**PC:** …I, I think my experience is that the team actually will sit and converse with one another. You know my wife will often know when I have a hard day at work, I'll come home and I'll sit in the house and I won’t say very much, but that's just my way of dealing with things, I just process it in my mind. And I probably won't, won't talk about it much. But actually that's, that’s we’re all different people will deal with things differently, you know.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, no. And one, the one of the kinda final questions that I had was, for you was how do you keep well in the job that you're doing and the work that you're doing but you've actually kind of moved into that very seamlessly there talking about how you do that and that kind of acknowledgement that we all, we all process things differently. But, but actually you've created, you've created spaces for your staff to have conversations if they want to. You're obviously, it sounds like you're, you're really one of the things I've also noticed about what you've been saying is the importance of building relationships, relationships with the, the families that you're, that you're caring for, but also with your colleagues and your staff that you're caring for. And it's, it's a kind of very person-centred approach to, to the work that you're doing, which is always lovely to, to kinda witness.

**PC:** It is no different to your own colleagues though, and what they're doing and the position of trust that they are being given. Because that family don't know what's going on and they don't know what's happening to that person. But they're calling upon you as professionals to help them and to try and deal with that situation. And the outcome of that situation might result in involvement on our part, which isn't what they expected to happen. But having that trust and having that dialogue with them and actually having that transition period between where your involvement has to come to an end because there's limits to how much further you can take them but our involvement needs to cease. And eventually it gets to the point where our involvement has to come to a natural end as well and there's only so far we can take a family and we need to point them to someone else if, if they're needing more support. But through all working together, I firmly believe that the time of a death can be made a more positive experience for a family, that they look back on it as a hard time, but a time that they can remember because they were well supported…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …and

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** … and, and things went in a better way than they thought or they feared that they, they would have, you know.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah and that is. Yeah, that's really important. I suppose one of the things I'd said to you at the very beginning was I might ask you about how health, health and funeral directors, well, how, how do we all work together better? I wonder if that kind of sums that up actually just in what you've said there.

**PC:** Yeah…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** I, I think so, you know, for, for us, you know, having a close relationship with all stakeholders that we're working with. And I think that's possibly one of the things that I personally find frustrating. You know the team always know when I'm going on my high horse about the fact that I can't get this agency on the phone or, or, or that, that part of the, the process, they haven't issued their documentation yet and why on earth can't they do that because that's holding things up and they don't understand that that's holding up this aspect. And, and if everyone understands each other's roles, then the whole experience is, is better. And it might be as something as simple as just seeing to a family look, the, the, the medical certificate cause of death is not going to be issued right now, but that's because we don't have a consultant on duty at the moment. But do you know what on Monday morning that's going to be issued. But we would suggest you go and contact the funeral director because there's an awful lot they can do in the background. You know, from, from my point…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …of view, there's nothing, nothing worse than a bereaved family that phoned me and it happened last week. We had a family walk into our office on Friday morning and, and, and Friday was a fairly busy day for us, we were short staffed so most of our team were committed but they said they would like to see someone that afternoon. And that family had been waiting since the Tuesday on the death certificate being issued and the death being registered and they came to see us on the Friday and the result was we managed to have one of our funeral directors meet with them that afternoon. We got the funeral tied up that afternoon but had that been handled definitely whether it was someone earlier on in the process or whether it was the registrar or who it was, I'd said to them, look, you need to phone the funeral director if you've not already done so. Because we could have had that conversation and we could have had that funeral arranged for that family while they were sitting waiting these two or three days so that…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …by the time we got to Friday lunchtime, the paperwork came over from the registrar and we said to them, here's the day and the time and it's all done. But the result was it came to the weekend and actually Saturday and Sunday were then two lost days, which then meant we couldn't get the florist, we couldn't get the catering establishment…

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** …for them and you know all of that. So, you know, the end result is still the same. But at the point that they contact us, then that's where we can start doing an awful lot behind the scenes. You know, I'm going to see two young lads just, just later on this morning actually and, and I knew their father, they don't know it yet, but them contacted me yesterday has, has been a massive help because as I'm talking to you, my colleagues are bringing that gentleman into our care from the hospital. So by the time I get to their house, we're going to be able to say to them, look, we've actually been…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** and I told them yesterday we'll hopefully…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …do this as soon as possible but I didn't promise them that because I need to find out if the hospitals…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …got the paperwork issued.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** But I've, I’ve also been able to go through our records because he's a single parent and, and I can remember my father looked after his own mother's funeral and I thought, well, where are we going to bury him because they want a burial funeral and we don't really want him to go in a grave on his own because his sons are young lads they're probably going to get married and, and, and go on and have their own families and maybe move away from the area. So being able to establish there's actually room beside his parents in that grave in the cemetery.

**LI:** Oh right.

**PC:** So, you know, when it comes to the point in the conversation, I'll, I’ll suggest that to them because they might, they might not be aware that that grave could accommodate more room but I've done all of that yesterday so that when I go to see them today, I've got a firmer idea of what their options are.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah.

**PC:** And if that wasn't an option, then there would be no point in me building up their hopes on that, you know so, you know, it’s an example of things starting off well and all going well they continue to go in that direction, you know.

**LI:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. So as we come to the end of the podcast, I wonder is there any final kind of summary or kind of final words that you'd like to say today or anything that, a final message maybe of what you would…?

**PC:** I think the message would be never, ever forget the position of trust that people give you. Never, never get out of bed in the morning and think, oh no, another hard day at work where I'm going to have members of the public that are going to say the wrong things, I'm going to get upset and it's going to be challenging or things, you know, and I think everyone at the moment, there's a massive focus on how the NHS is broken, but actually I, I don't see it that way. I see some really good examples of people being well supported and well cared for and having positive experiences in the latter stages of their, their time on earth. And I think that with the right people focusing on the right things and not allowing the problems to become the focus, people are, are better supported. So never ever forget the, the, the position of trust that people are giving you and the fact that you can make a massive difference. Someone once said to me and a motivational kind of speaker it's all about TNT - Tiny Noticeable Things. They have an explosive impact, you know, so you'll go out and you'll do a simple little thing. And, you know, for us, that might be as simple as when we're in a family home and we bring the deceased into our care, that we go back to the bedroom and we make the bed and we put the cushions back on the, the bed or, you know, whatever it is…

**LI:** Oh yeah.

**PC:** …that we do. But we don't, we don't just leave the bed covers all folded back once we've brought the deceased…

**LI:** Yeah

**PC:** …from, from…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …the bed…

**LI:** Yeah.

**PC:** …and brought them into our care or, you know, little things like that or suggesting to the family, why, why don't we do it this way or why, why don't we do that or why don't you have a bit of time together and let's, let's do this or shall I make you a cup of tea and then we'll chat about it or you know, these are all things that people remember, you know.

**LI:** So TNT. So we all need…

**PC:** Yes.

**LI:** …to focus on them, don't we?

**PC:** TNT.

**LI:** Tiny noticeable things.

**PC:** Tiny noticeable things. As long as it’s said someone else said that though I'm stealing it from someone else.

**LI:** I think it's, it sounds like quite a nice kind of not mortal, but something for us all to adopt in, in whatever we do actually that the tiny noticeable things do make a difference.

**PC:** Yeah, yeah, absolutely.

**LI:** Well, it's been a pleasure talking to you today, Paul. I've really enjoyed talking to you and finding out a bit more about what you do. And quite overwhelmed by the kindness and compassion and person centredness actually of, of what you do, not maybe, and I think most people probably don't know a lot about what you do, as you already, as you said at the start, either people say, oh, that's a horrible job or, or ask you lots of questions about it. But, but a lot of people don't want to talk about it because we have this, we seem to be frightened too much to talk about death. And so I'm sure there's lots of people who don't really know the full extent of everything that you're, you're involved in. So thank you so much for, for taking the time to talk to me today. I've really enjoyed the conversation.

**PC:** Thank you. It's been nice talking.

**LI:** Thank you.

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