

# Bereavement Care and Postvention in a Coronial Setting

*HNECCPHN Chrysalis Wellbeing Series #6: Postvention Support - Webinar*  
*23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021*

Danny Nugus, Senior Forensic Medicine Social Worker  
Forensic Medicine Newcastle, Forensic and Analytical Sciences Service  
[Danny.Nugus@health.nsw.gov.au](mailto:Danny.Nugus@health.nsw.gov.au)

<https://www.pathology.health.nsw.gov.au/our-networks/forensic-medicine/information-for-families>



Health  
Pathology

*creating better health and justice systems*



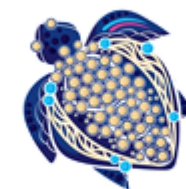
for all of  
**us**



# Acknowledgement of Country

NSW Health Pathology acknowledges the traditional custodians of the lands on which we work and pay our respects to ancestors and Elders, past, present and emerging.

We are committed to honouring Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' unique cultural and spiritual relationships to the land, waters and seas and their rich contribution to society.



for all of  
**us**

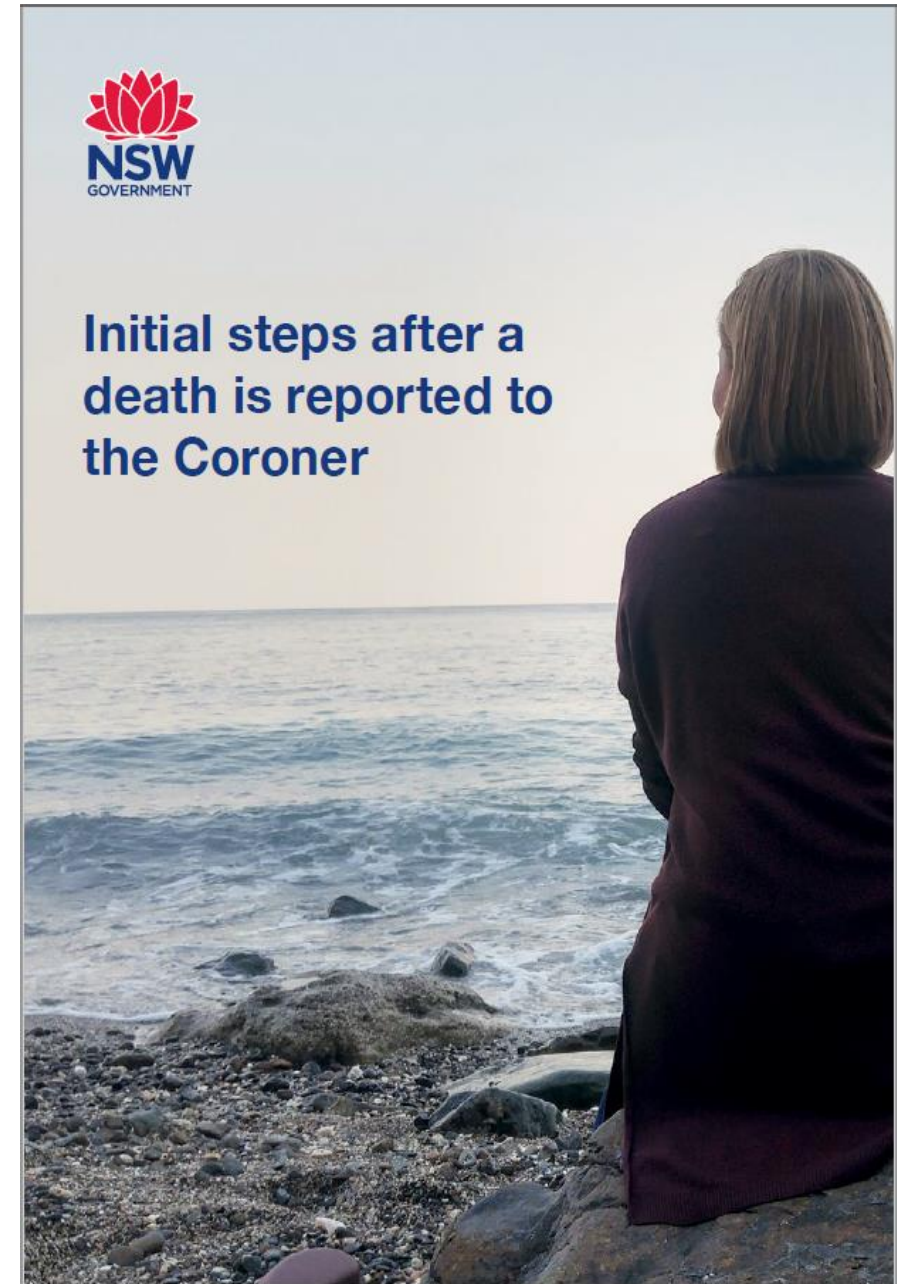
# Coroner's Role



“Coroners investigate certain kinds of deaths in order to determine the identity of the deceased and the date, place, circumstances and medical cause of death”

[www.coroners.justice.nsw.gov.au](http://www.coroners.justice.nsw.gov.au)

Bob: ‘To reconnect with life I need answers’



# Changes to the NSW Coroner's Act

“...protect the **dignity of the deceased persons, involve family members** in decisions about post mortem investigations and ensure that such investigations are completed in a timely manner”

Hon Jon Hatzistergos, Attorney General, NSW Hansard, Legislative council 2009

A person conducting a post mortem examination is to endeavour to use the **least invasive** procedures to establish the cause of many of a person's death

Coroner's Act 2009, No.41, Ch.8, Part 8.1, s.88

Senior next-of-kin **right to object** to autopsy and whole organ retention



for all of  
**us**

A word cloud of forensic and legal terms. The words are arranged in a roughly circular shape, with some words being significantly larger than others. The colors of the words range from dark green to dark blue. The background is a solid light beige color.

scene  
autopsy  
senior-next-of-kin  
decomposition information  
suicide Inquest  
photos timeframes evidence  
goodbye funeral identification note  
court fingerprint post-mortem Coronial  
investigation superannuation homicide lengthy  
unanswered injuries skeletal  
children die home destitute kill  
saved retention hold SUDI  
legal incinerated  
trauma suffer needs report unknown  
insurance questions Police unexpected  
crime DNA histology suspect  
uncertain unmet sudden unresolved  
toxicology unidentified Coroner's  
brief know unexplained  
multiple  
remains  
brain

"Death lies on her like an untimely frost  
Upon the sweetest flower of all the field."

*William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet, Act IV, Scene V, Line 24*



"These days grief seems like  
walking on a frozen river; most  
of the time he feels safe enough,  
but there is always that danger  
he will plunge through."

*David Nicholls 'One Day'*

# New South Wales

- Australian population: ~25 million
- NSW population: nearly 9 million
- Australian deaths p.a.: ~160,000
- NSW deaths p.a.: ~50,000
- NSW Coroner-reported deaths p.a.: 6,500 (nearly 1 in 8)
- Police report death to Coroner (Magistrate at Local Court). Coroner refers to NSW Forensic Medicine (3 sites). Forensic Medicine Social Work Service liaise with family.



Forensic Medicine  
Information System



Health  
Pathology

# digital transformation of statewide case management

improving timeliness and  
support for bereaved families



Leading the way - integrating systems to deliver truly connected care



for all of  
**us**

# Families will want to know:



- What to do next
- When can the body be released
- What will happen next (e.g. police, Coronial process, post mortem, I.D.)
- What is being done to assist them
- What is currently known about the cause and circumstances of the death
- Available services
- Resources, guidance, individual and family support

“What we wanted was information about exactly how and why people died ... how the identification process worked ... This would have helped more than counsellors telling us how we should feel”

*Dorries, 1999; Eyre 2002.*

“How my family were treated in those 11 days remained with me and influenced my life ever since” – *Pamela Dix (Lockerbie 1988).*



for all of  
**us**

# Our Place – Forensic Medicine Newcastle

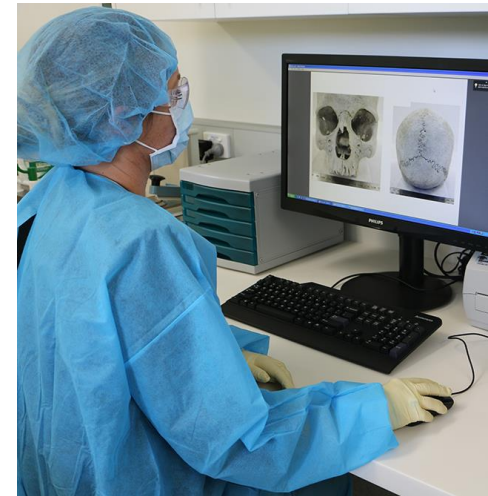


for all of  
**us**

# Our Facilities



# Our People



for all of  
**us**

# Forensic Medicine Social Work team (Newcastle)



for all of  
**us**

# Forensic Medicine Social Work Service

- Situated within the Forensic Mortuary (access ++)
- The role of the Forensic Medicine Social Worker includes:
  - **Information (proactive):**
    - Coroners process/objections
    - Post mortem/ autopsy & medical cause of death
    - Reports – final (full) post mortem report and police briefs
    - Circumstantial information, e.g. suicide notes; photos
  - **Support/ Advocacy:**
    - Facilitated choices around access to the body, including viewing/ID
    - Advocate for needs within ‘the system’ / consult and integrate needs and wants of the family
    - Memory collation e.g. hand and foot prints of babies/children
  - **Focused therapeutic work**
    - Brief, short-term, specific (e.g. facilitated access to information)
    - Support After Suicide Program
    - Embedded counselling



# Ripple effect – early intervention, prevention, and public health



"No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear."

*C.S Lewis*



Nugus, D. (2015). *The “ripple effect”: A conceptual model for understanding grief and the preventative opportunities for timely and targeted social work intervention*. 7<sup>th</sup> HNE Social Work Conference. May 4, 2015.



for all of  
**us**

# Some key points

- Facilitate informed and supported choices (see References)
- Challenge 'systemic paternalism' ('They told me I couldn't...')
- It's never too late – advocate, find a way, focus on what we *can* do
- Empower, normalise, don't pathologise
- Build relationships and influence 'the system'

'An abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behaviour'

*Viktor E. Frankl (1946), Man's Search for Meaning*



*Julie Donald*

# Continuing bonds

“...love as powerful as your mother’s for you leaves its own mark. Not a scar, no visible sign ... to have been loved so deeply, even though the person who loved us is gone, will give us some protection forever. It is in your very skin.

Professor Albus P.W.B. Dumbledore,  
O.M. (First Class), Grand Sorc., D. Wiz., X.J. (sorc.), S. of Mag.Q.  
In Rowling, J.K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*. London:  
Bloomsbury.



“What will survive of us is love”  
*Philip Larkin: An Arundel Tomb, c.1956*



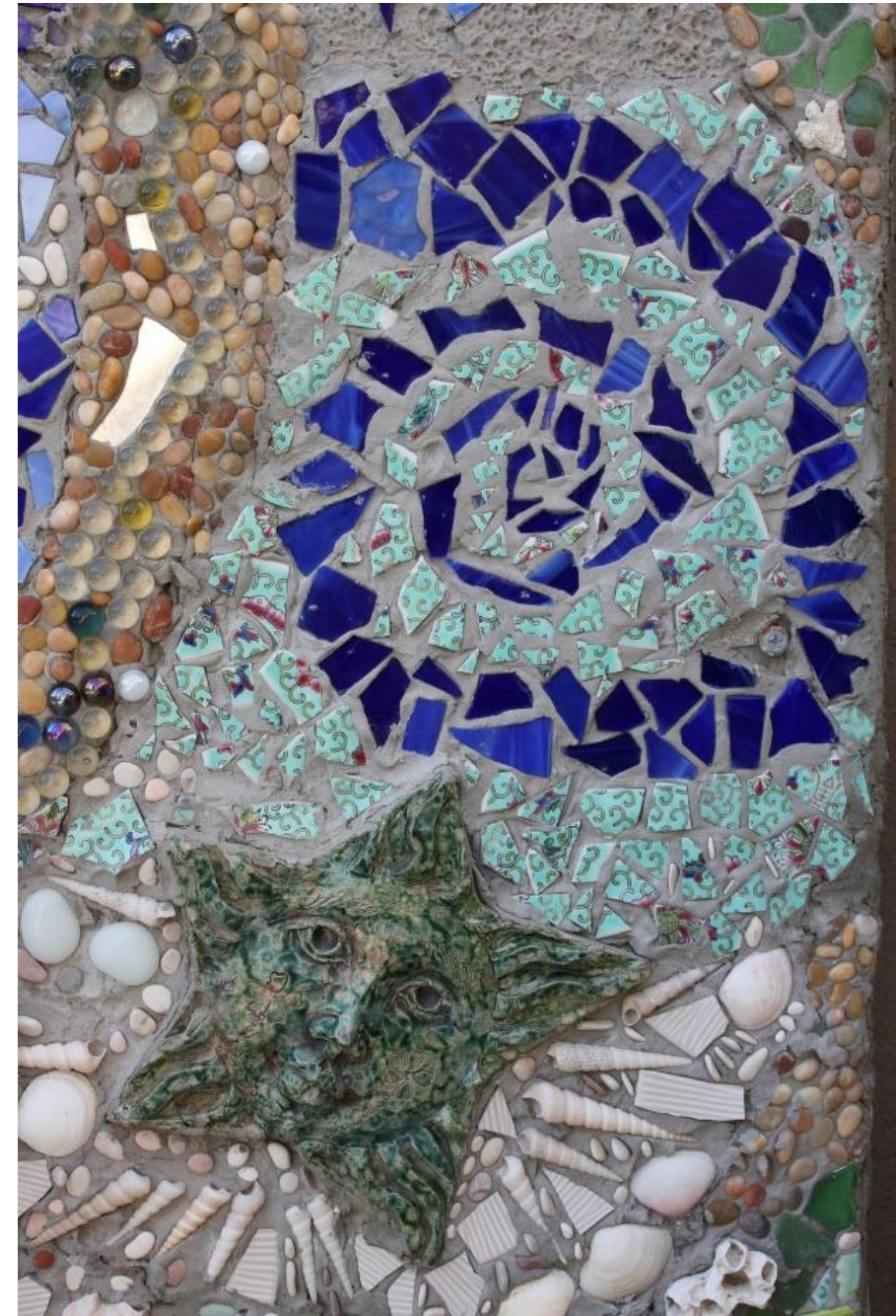
for all of  
**us**

"A pain in our body, a heartache, an unjust treatment may seem inert, impermeable, unchanging. It may appear to be all that is, all that ever will be. But when we look closely, instead of solidity, we see porousness, fluidity, motion. We begin to see gaps between the moments of suffering. We see the small changes that are happening all the time in the texture, the intensity, the contours of our pain."

*Sharon Salzberg: 'Faith: Trusting Your Own Deepest Experience'.  
(She defines 'Faith' in a willingness to see the possibility for change)*

**“Those who have a ‘why’ to live, can bear with almost any ‘how’.”**

*Viktor E. Frankl (1946), Man's Search for Meaning*



# Beyond the 'self' in self-care

- Whose responsibility is staff wellbeing?
- What are our 'tools for the job'?
- What do we need from our organisation/ management/ team/ others (and ourselves) to do our job?
- Apply professional practice principles, theory and values to ourselves – practice what we preach
- Self-care = self-advocacy = improved outcomes = sustainable practice



# References/ Reading

Attig, T. (2001). Relearning the world: Making and finding meanings. In R.A. Neimeyer (Ed.) *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*. Ch. 2, pp.33-53

Awooner-Renner, S. (1991). I desperately needed to see my son. *BMJ*, 302: p.356

Aynsley-Green, A., Penny, A., & Richardson, S. (2011). Bereavement in childhood: risks, consequences and responses (Editorial). *BMJ*, 2011: p.1-6

Barnes, M. (2010). Reviewing reliance on internal autopsies. Asia Pacific Coroners Society Annual Conference, Auckland, 2010.

Biddle, L. (2003). Public hazards or private tragedies? An exploratory study of the effect of coroners' procedures on those bereaved by suicide. *Social Science and Medicine*, 56: pp.1033-1045

Chapple, A., & Ziebland, S. (2010). Viewing the body after bereavement due to a traumatic death: qualitative study in the UK. *BMJ*, 340(7754): p.2-11

Chapple, A., Zeibland, S., & Hawton, K. (2012), A proper, fitting explanation? Suicide bereavement and perceptions of the Coroner's verdict. *Crisis*, 33(4): pp.230-238

Dix, P. (1998). Access to the death: the role of relatives in the aftermath of a disaster. *The Lancet*, 352(9133): pp.1061-1062

Drayton, J. (2013). Bodies-in-life/bodies-in-death: social work, coronial autopsies and the bonds of identity. *British Journal of Social Work*, 43: pp.264-281

Eyre, A. (2002). Improving procedures and minimising distress: Issues in the identification of victims following disasters. *The Australian Journal of Emergency Management*, 17(1): pp.9-14

Frankl, V.E. (1946). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press (republished 2006)

Harrington, C., & Sprowl, B. (2012). Family members' experiences with viewing in the wake of sudden death. *Omega*, 64(1): pp.65-82

Harris, D. (Ed.)(2016). *Handbook of Social Justice in Loss and Grief: Exploring Diversity, Equity and Inclusion*. London: Routledge

Hodgkinson, P.E., Joseph, S., Yule, W., Williams, R. (1993). Viewing human remains following a disaster: helpful or harmful? *Medicine, Science and the Law*, 3(3): pp.197-202

Holland, J.M., Currier, J.M., & Neimeyer, R.A. (2006). Meaning reconstruction in the first two years of bereavement: the role of sense-making and benefit-finding. *Omega*, 53(3): pp.175-191

Howarth, G. (1997). Death on the road: The role of the English coroner's court in the social construction of an accident. In, M. Mitchell (Ed.), *The Aftermath of Road Accidents: Psychological, Social and Legal Consequences of an Everyday Trauma* (pp.145-158). London: Routledge

- International Work Group on Death, Dying and Bereavement (IWG)(2015). The case for a sociology of dying, death and bereavement. [www.iwgddb.org](http://www.iwgddb.org)
- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1989). Assumptive worlds and the stress of traumatic events: applications of the schema construct. *Social Cognition*, 7: pp.113-136
- Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Toward a new psychology of trauma*. New York: Free Press
- Janzen, L., Cadell, S., & Westhues, A. (2004), From death notification through the funeral: Bereaved parents' experiences and their advice to professionals. *Omega*, 48(2): pp.149-164
- Jordan, J. (2001). Is suicide bereavement different? A reassessment of the literature. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 31: pp.91-102
- Kellehear, A. (2015). Death education as a public health issue. In T. Attig and Stillion (Eds.) *Death, Dying, and Bereavement: Contemporary Perspectives, Institutions and Practices*. New York, NY: Sage Publishing
- Larson, DG & Hoyt, WT (2009) Grief counselling efficacy: What have we learned? *Bereavement Care*: pp.28: 3
- Mayer, D.M., & Rosenfeld, A.G., & Gilbert, K. (2013). Lives forever changed: family bereavement experiences after sudden cardiac death. *Applied Nursing Research*, 26: pp.168-173
- Mowll, J. (2007). Reality and regret: viewing or not viewing the body after a sudden death. *Bereavement Care*, 26(1): pp.3-6
- Neimeyer, R.A., Burke, L.A., Mackay, M.M., & van Dyke Stringer, J.G. (2010). Grief therapy and the reconstruction of meaning: from principles to practice. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 40: pp.73-83
- Nugus, D. (2011). Seeing beyond the sadness: Hope, resilience, and sustainable practice in childhood bereavement. In I.Renzenbrink (Ed.). *Caregiver Stress and Staff Support in Illness, Death and Dying*. OUP. Ch.11
- Omerov, P., Steineck, G., Nyberg, T., Runeson, B., & Nyberg, U. (2015). Viewing the body after bereavement due to suicide: a population-based survey in Sweden. *PloS ONE*, 9(7): e101799. Doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0101799
- Rostila, M., Saarela, J., & Kawachi, I. (2012). The forgotten griever: A nationwide follow-up study of mortality subsequent to the death of a sibling. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 176(4): pp.338-356
- Ryan, M., & Giljohann, A. (2013). 'I needed to know': imparting graphic and distressing details about a suicide to the bereaved. *Bereavement Care*, 32(3): pp.111-116
- Senate Community Affairs References Committee (2010). The Hidden Toll: Suicide in Australia. Canberra: Senate Printing Unit. Commonwealth of Australia.
- Stephen, A.I., Macduff, C., Petrie, D.J., Tseng, F-M., Schut, H., Corden, A., & Birrell, J. (2015). The economic cost of bereavement in Scotland. *Death Studies*, 39(3): pp.151-157
- United Synergies (2011). Economic evaluation of the StandBy Response Service: Final Report. 5 October 2011. [info@thescienceofknowing.com](mailto:info@thescienceofknowing.com), Griffith University.
- Whelan, J., & Gent, H. (2012). Viewings of deceased persons in a hospital mortuary: critical reflection of social work practice. *Australian Social Work*, 66(1): pp.130-144
- Winchester Nadeau, J. (2001). Family construction of meaning. In, R.A. Neimeyer (Ed). *Meaning Reconstruction and the Experience of Loss*. Ch.5: pp.95-112
- Winchester Nadeau, J. (2006). Metaphorically speaking. *Illness, Crisis and Loss*, 14(3): pp.201-221

# Thank you

Any questions?



**r i t e**

for all of  
**us**