


Road to recovery

Police officers are sometimes the first to deliver bad news to relatives following a car accident.

BrakeCare, a charity who work with the police and with victims and their families, is holding a conference on the subject next month.

Jools Townsend, communications manager of BrakeCare, writes about their work and gives advice for police officers.

 Every day in the UK, ten families must face the devastating news that a loved one has been violently and unexpectedly killed in a road crash.

Around a hundred more families are affected by a serious injury, including life-changing injuries such as brain damage, paralysis and limb-loss. The sad truth is that care for these families is patchy and inadequate – there is no national, centrally funded, face-to-face support service for road crash victims. For this reason, police family liaison officers (FLOs) have a key role to play and can be an invaluable source of support for these vulnerable families at the start of their road to recovery.

Although it is not the job of the police to provide a counselling service, officers can, and should, communicate with road crash victims in a respectful and empathetic manner and can signpost available care agencies and sources of information and support.

BrakeCare, a division of national road safety charity Brake, has provided invaluable services

both directly to road crash victims, and also to the professionals who liaise with and serve these victims, including police, for several years. These services include literature, a helpline and training for professionals.

Brake was set up ten years ago to tackle the thousands of deaths and injuries that occur on our roads every year and to care for road crash victims. When Brake was founded in 1995, there were no national care services dedicated to supporting families affected by road death and injury. Today, Brake's care division is a national provider of dedicated care services for crash victims, although Brake continues to lobby the Government to provide funding for a national face-to-face support service.

Many police officers will be familiar with BrakeCare's guide, *Advice for bereaved families and friends following a death on the road*, which provides information on practical procedures and emotional matters.

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The Iowa Model

- The Iowa model states that notification should be given to the parent, partner or child (although there is specific advice for informing young people of a death), and they must be informed face-to-face. Two people should attend to give notification - in most cases two police officers, but sometimes a police officer and a member of the clergy, doctor, family friend or bereavement councillor.
- The news should be delivered as soon as possible but ensuring the highest degree of certainty of the identity of the deceased or injured. There is no benefit in saving the news until later, no matter what time of day or night it is, and research shows that this is often resented by the affected family. When a person is critically ill, prompt notification may give the family chance to visit the person in hospital before death.
- Plain language is essential. For example, in the case of a death, it is more effective to use the words 'dead', 'died', or 'killed' rather than euphemisms such as "he didn't make it", "she was fatally injured", or "he's not coming back". Such phrases might be easier for the officer to utter but they are too easily misunderstood by the family in their initial shock. It is also important to refer to the person who has died by name, rather than 'the body' or the 'deceased'.
- The Iowa model also states that it is appropriate for the officer to show compassion and say 'I am sorry that this has happened', rather than appear cold and uncaring. It is not unnatural to feel sympathy for the bereaved, and this might even be expressed by the officer feeling a need to shed a tear.
- It is also important for family liaison officers (FLOs) to understand the range of possible reactions from families who are recently bereaved or affected by a serious injury. People deal with shock and grief in different ways. Families might be quiet or aggressive. They may be confused and find it hard to take in the news. They may react physically, by fainting, shaking, shouting or crying. All these reactions are 'normal' and police officers should be aware of them and expect them.
- Unless the affected family specifically requests, officers should not just deliver the news and leave. Once the news starts to sink in, the family often need more information about circumstances, location and time and so on. Officers should answer any questions to the best of their ability but should not speculate. Working in pairs can allow one officer to remain with the family while the other makes discreet follow-up enquiries. In cases of bereavement, questions of identification and viewing the body must also be addressed. Even when the deceased has suffered horrific injuries, it is for the bereaved rather than the officer to choose whether the body should be viewed. At least one close member of the family present should be made aware of what to expect in terms of injuries, ideally the primary bereaved themselves.
- As well as speaking to families in a clear and sympathetic way, FLOs must understand the limitations of the service they provide to families, set boundaries and have exit strategies. While they can provide information and support, they are not counsellors and are not in a position to provide specialist trauma support. Officers should therefore inform families about sources of support, such as telephone helplines and local care agencies. FLOs can use BrakeCare's support literature and helpline to help direct families to relevant sources of support.

to provide this literature for free to every police force in the UK, to hand to families following every road death. Last year, the charity also introduced a guide for families affected by serious injury.

BrakeCare training includes a range of options for police, from six-day induction courses for officers new to family liaison work, to half-day refresher courses for experienced officers, run by our expert trainer.

The organisation has recently also introduced free one-hour input sessions delivered by trained Brake volunteers, who have themselves been bereaved in a road crash and are able to talk from personal experience. The courses focus on the importance of honesty, empathy and giving victims choices.

As the charity has developed its services over the past decade, police family liaison has also developed in terms of best practice.

Most work on determining best practice for delivering the news to a family that their loved one has been killed or seriously

injured has been carried out in the United States. In 1992 the Crime Victim Assistance Division of the Iowa Department of Justice published a model for basic trauma message procedures. The model, *In person, In time - Recommended Procedures for Death Notification*, focuses on the message to those who have been bereaved as being delivered 'in person, in time, in pairs, in plain language, and with compassion'. This model has been adopted by a number of North American police departments and is similar to the protocol adopted as best practice by some British police, such as in Cumbria.

Delivering the news to a family is a key part of family liaison work and arguably one of the hardest jobs that police officers have to do. The way in which the news is delivered will always be remembered by that family and while it can be difficult to envisage the 'best way' to deliver it, if it is delivered inappropriately or insensitively, it can significantly add to the trauma for the affected family.

BrakeCare's dedicated helpline, 01484 421611, provides emotional support and information to anyone affected by death or injury in a road crash. Police officers and care professionals can not only refer victims to the helpline, they can also call it themselves for advice on liaising with road crash victims in a supportive way. BrakeCare's experienced helpline operator answers calls from police every week who want to provide the best possible information and advice to affected families.

Family liaison best practice is one of the issues being addressed at BrakeCare's annual conference on care provision for road crash victims and their families. Road to Recovery takes place on 30 November 2005 at the Centennial Centre in Edgbaston, Birmingham. Speakers include: Fiona Mactaggart, Home Office Victim's Minister, Duncan McGarry, National Police Family Liaison Advisor, National Centre for Policing Excellence, speaking about best practice developments in Police Family Liaison; Yunus Dudhwala, Multifaith Manager, Newham University Hospital NHS Trust, speaking about cultural and religious issues for support workers; Mary Williams, chief executive of Brake, speaking about the BrakeCare perspective on road crash victim care - campaigning for quality support services. The conference provides a training and networking opportunity for police officers who deal with bereaved families and costs £85 (+VAT). To book, call Brake on 01484 559909, email admin@brake.org.uk

- For more information on Brake's care services for road crash victims, visit www.brake.org.uk and click on 'help and support'. For information on training provided by Brake for police on liaising with bereaved families (including free one-hour input sessions), call 01484 559909 or email brakecare@brake.org.uk.