

Notes on Family Viewing

This leaflet has been written by members of Disaster Action, survivors and bereaved people from 28 disasters. These include the King's Cross fire, Lockerbie air crash, Hillsborough football stadium crush, Marchioness riverboat sinking, Southall and Ladbroke Grove train crashes, 11 September attacks, South East Asian Tsunami, the 7 July 2005 London bombings, the Sharm El Sheikh and other recent overseas attacks and transportation disasters. Our aim is to give voice to those on the receiving end of disaster.

Many of our members have had experience of the death of close family and friends and their identification through odontology, finger printing, DNA, visual means, jewellery and other associated items. Some members have been able to see those who have died and others have not, depending on the circumstances of the disaster and the way in which responders have dealt with this matter. Our experience underlines the need for flexibility and the importance of, wherever possible, offering informed choice as well as treating each set of bereaved individually.

These notes should not be considered exhaustive, but are an effort to outline the most pressing considerations. Families will have the same objective as the responding services: speedy, **accurate identification and release of the dead**. The following notes are written with this objective in mind.

Family Viewing

Every effort should be made to enable people to see a body as soon as possible whatever the event. Seeing a body at a later stage, perhaps at a funeral director's to whom the body has been released – sometimes following a lengthy identification process - is quite a different matter. By this time family members may feel unnerved and daunted by the prospect of seeing the person. We strongly recommend that viewing facilities should therefore be made available when a temporary mortuary is set up following a major emergency. While it is understood that this may depend on the circumstances of the disaster, this intention should be the starting point for a temporary mortuary plan.

Offering **informed choices** to families, including whether to view disrupted bodies and remains should be the norm. It is in the immediate and long-term best interests of all concerned if the timeliness of the human elements of an emergency are understood and integrated into the planning at appropriate stages, and not postponed as 'too difficult' to resolve. Consideration of the potential benefits as well as risks of this approach should be taken into account.

Issues to consider:

- Families may move quickly from understanding the constraints on responders to distrust and resentment if their needs (including the need for speedy, accurate identification, viewing and release) are not being addressed. This will cause more problems, such as: losing trust and cooperation from families; the risk of an adverse psychosocial impact on the bereaved, responders and wider community; adverse publicity; pressure from the media; and political pressure
- Families will not consider logistical difficulties an acceptable reason for delaying viewing
- Viewing at a funeral director's facility some time later after release of the body **is not the same as the opportunity to see the body as soon as possible after identification** (see Chapple and Ziebland research below)
- If viewing facilities are not made available, local funeral directors will have to take responsibility for issues around viewing. While we appreciate that appropriate training is available to funeral directors on this issue, many (if not most) will not have dealt with the dead from a major disaster. The experience of our members and others whom we have been in contact with have illustrated the difficulties that can arise with attempting to view a body at a

later stage

- Despite the best efforts of those responding, a consistent service to families will be difficult if not impossible to guarantee if viewing of individuals is cascaded in this way to funeral directors around the country
- The assumption (or misconception) that work around DVI should stop on a mortuary site because families may be visiting a part of the facility dedicated to viewing should be challenged. It should be possible to develop an appropriate and respectful protocol, which will include careful consideration of **where viewing facilities should be sited** in relation to the mortuary without delaying or interfering with the ongoing vital work of identifying all those who have been killed
- Police family liaison officers can explain what activities are taking place on the site, and its purpose, **prior** to any visit by a family
- Some families may visit the site whether or not viewing facilities have been set up, which should be taken into account. Families have done this in the past. Making people feel like unwelcome intruders can add greatly to their already considerable distress
- We recognise that it is not possible to plan for all eventualities. If circumstances of an emergency make it impossible for viewing facilities to be set up, this can be explained but this **must not be considered the default option.**

Further Information

- [Disaster Victim Identification: Relatives' Experiences](#)
- [Disaster Victim Identification: Issues for Families and Implications for Police Family Liaison Officers and Coroners' Officers](#)

Viewing the body after bereavement due to traumatic death: qualitative study in the UK

See <http://www.primarycare.ox.ac.uk/pc-bibliography/ChappleZiebland2010>

Alison Chapple and Sue Ziebland (BMJ, 2010)

Conclusion from this research:

‘Even after a traumatic death, relatives should have the opportunity to view the body, and time to decide which family member, if any, should identify remains. Officials should prepare relatives for what they might see, and explain any legal reasons why the body cannot be touched. Guidelines for professional practice must be sensitive to the needs and preferences of people bereaved by traumatic death.’

Further Information

Disaster Action

Support Groups and Caring Organisations

Useful Contacts

Further Information

Books