Delivering a death message

The impact that delivering a death message will have on the relative or next of kin should never be underestimated. The person receiving the message may never forget the face and conduct of the officer delivering it. Although it is impossible to change the situation, there are steps to ensure that your actions do not exacerbate it. Informing a relative that their loved one has lost their life requires emotional intelligence, compassion and good communication.

There is no single way of delivering a death message, but there are approaches that will help you. Keep in mind how the death happened: is this a sudden unexpected death, is it suicide or suspicious and a criminal investigation has started? The circumstances will be different in every case, but death messages should always be delivered as soon as practical, professionally and with empathy.

See also APP on suicide and bereavement response for cases involving suspected suicide.

Timeliness

Deliver the message without undue delay to make sure the family know what has happened as soon as possible.

Make every effort to ensure the message is delivered personally, where possible before the family hear about it through social media or other channels.

Preparation

Good preparation will help delivery of the message, the way it is received and make sure the family is given all the relevant information. It will also ensure that any information needed by the coroner and the investigation is gathered effectively.

- Where possible, two officers should deliver the message, with one officer taking the lead. Where a second officer is not available, request support if required.
- Rehearse what you are going to say. If two officers are present, determine who will say what.
- Determine if there are any communication requirements, for example assistance for people with communication difficulties, or for people who speak English as a second language and may need the help of an interpreter.

- Find out the circumstances of the incident from the attending officer (who may be from another force), the contact centre or the coroner’s office. Determine what can and cannot be said to the bereaved about the incident and how their loved one died, and whether, for example, there will be a post-mortem examination. Find out whether you need to obtain any information from the bereaved, and how that information is to be handed over to the officer in the case.

- Find out what information you need to gather on behalf of the coroner, for example:
  - the full name of the deceased
  - date of birth
  - home address
  - full contact details of next of kin and any single point of contact
  - GP details

- Before you attend, try to have the answers to key questions such as:
  - when and where the death occurred
  - how it occurred (if appropriate)
  - whether they were with anyone at the time
  - where the body has been taken

- Before contacting a bereaved family member, confirm their identity and their relationship to the deceased. Family members may, for example, include spouse, partner, close relatives, siblings, dependents or a person who has a relationship with the deceased.

- Provide contact information for the coroner’s office and/or mortuary so that the bereaved know where the deceased is being kept. Where possible, provide this in writing.

- Following an unexpected death aboard, police may also be asked to deliver the death messages on behalf of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO). Information about the death should be sourced through the FCDO. Where additional enquiries are needed, and the FCDO are unable to help, contact the International Crime Coordination Centre (ICCC) for advice.
Delivery

How the message is delivered will not only affect how the person who receives it reacts to it, but it will also reflect on your professionalism and the police.

When delivering the message, do the following.

- **Assess the risks.** Is the location suitable? This is particularly important where the bereaved are not at their home address. If others are present, determine with the bereaved whether their presence is appropriate. Consider how the bereaved may be affected by receiving the news that their loved one has died. If the bereaved is not in their own home, they may need to be taken home or given support to get home (consider whether they are safe to drive themselves).

- Think about your behaviour as you approach the bereaved, or their address, either on foot or in the car. Consider the effect on the bereaved if you are seen laughing or behaving inappropriately as you approach.

- Before knocking on the door, turn your radio down to avoid distractions. Ensure you look professional. Wear your hat but remove it when you enter the location. If not allowed to enter, remove your hat before delivering the message.

- If there is no one at home, it may be appropriate to speak to the neighbours to help locate the bereaved family. Check that they know the bereaved; do not share why you are looking for them.

- Confirm the person’s identity, introduce yourself and explain the reason for your visit (for example, ‘Can we come in, please?’; and once in, ‘I’m afraid we have some bad news’).

- People may react in unexpected ways – disbelief, denial, anger or a combination. Ask them to sit down, as some people may faint or collapse. Make sure they understand what they are being told – information might need to be repeated or provided in writing.

- Deliver the message clearly and calmly – get to the point. Know what to say and what not to say. Use the deceased’s name rather than ‘the body’. Don’t use jargon. Don’t be afraid to use the words ‘dead’, or ‘died’ and avoid euphemisms such as ‘passed away’ or ‘no longer with us’, but ensure your language is appropriate.

- Avoid making any promises you cannot keep. Similarly, don’t make promises on behalf of others (for example, don’t tell them ‘a family liaison officer (FLO) will contact you first’.
thing in the morning’ if you haven’t arranged this previously. Note that an FLO is not deployed in all cases of sudden unexpected death).

- Be as open and transparent as circumstances allow. Provide as much information as possible, without harming the investigation. Be honest with the family and tell them we may not know all the information straight away. The bereaved may want to know the following.
  - How/where did the death occur?
  - Was the death instant? Was there any suffering?
  - Where is he/she? Can I see him/her?
  - When can there be a funeral?

- Be sensitive with the details of the circumstances surrounding the death. Consider the deceased’s religion or beliefs. Certain cultures have strict customs about burial, but it may be necessary to delay the burial for the effectiveness of the investigation. If required, the senior investigating officer should discuss this with the family.

- Inform the family of any organisations available locally and provide relevant contact details.

- Ask the family not to start moving, taking or disposing of anything belonging to the deceased without taking advice from a solicitor about the existence of a will.

- Offer a (non-alcoholic) drink and/or other support to the person receiving the message.

- Ask whether you need to, or whether they wish you to deliver the message to other family members or whether they are comfortable doing so. Not all families have close or stable relationships and some family members may be estranged, or there may be issues such as court orders or bail conditions preventing the bereaved from contacting other relatives.

- If there are children present, consider carefully how to approach this. The message should not be delivered to the adult and the child simultaneously. Seek advice and assistance if necessary. A bereaved parent may ask for an officer to be present when they tell a child. If the message needs to be given to a child, for example about a parent’s death, seek additional advice as other support services may need to be involved.
Exit strategy

It is important to plan how the meeting will end.

- **Review any identified risks** and the impact of receiving the message on the bereaved, especially if you are leaving them alone.
- Ask whether anyone else should be informed.
- If necessary, be prepared to obtain medical aid or take the bereaved home or to a relative, friend or neighbour’s home to provide support.
- Be empathetic and consider how you would wish to be left in this situation. There is a balance between outstaying your welcome and rushing to leave.
- Leave contact details for the officer in the case, FLO or a CAD number and/or contact details of the hospital or undertaker service. Bear in mind that the bereaved may not be able to get access to the deceased without prior arrangement with the hospital and the SIO.

Handover on return

Ensure that others involved in the investigation have all the information available from your visit. This will assist future planning, for example, or for the deployment of an FLO.

- Make sure you record the details of your visit, any information you have given the bereaved and any information you have gathered from them.
- Pass this to the relevant person verbally if possible, or via the crime report or by email.

And finally, recognise the effect on you

You may also have a delayed reaction to the situation. Know what help and support is available to you, both formal and informal, from:

- line managers
- colleagues
- force wellbeing support, for example trauma risk management (TRiM)
- other external support (including Oscar Kilo) via the College of Policing website