



Grave Words: Notifying Survivors about Sudden, Unexpected Deaths

By Kenneth V. Iserson, MD. 364 pp. Galen Press, Ltd, PO Box 64400, Tucson, AZ 85728-4000, 1999. \$38.95.

In the current milieu of healthcare delivery, where at times humanistic elements of practice are less apparent, *Grave Words: Notifying Survivors about Sudden, Unexpected Deaths* emerges to remind physicians, and indeed anyone involved with notification of others about death, of the importance of doing it properly. Iserson provides his audience with a how-to manual on effectively communicating with survivors when sudden unexpected deaths occur.

The book begins with a statement of the problem: basically, death notification is not done well. Sudden, unexpected death has a great impact on survivors, and notification of such death is frequently an event that changes one's life forever. Notifiers, however, generally are not sufficiently experienced to deliver such news. Iserson suggests that by using death notification protocols and by gaining experience through on-the-job training and modeling experienced notifiers, the negative impact of death notification of survivors may be lessened.

In the first section of the book, Iserson offers thorough analyses of various important elements to death notification. He discusses topics such as communication with survivors, and the importance of verbal as well as nonverbal communication skills. He touches on the use of interpreters to convey bad news, offers suggestions for dealing with anger, and discusses the use of humor.

He nicely articulates techniques for

delivering bad news in the setting of sudden death. He discusses the importance of using "D" words—death, dying, died—and the implications and meaning of death in various cultures. Another chapter raises issues regarding notification over the telephone. A chapter on organ tissue donation and autopsy permission is well done, as is the treatment of issues related to viewing the body, and acute grief reactions. At the end of the first section, there is a list of various support groups with their full addresses and telephone numbers, adding to the value of this book as a reference.

In the following section, Iserson describes protocols more specifically for survivors. Important considerations for informing parents of a child's death, and for telling children of death are included here. In addition, protocols for notifying friends, lovers, coworkers, and students are provided. Like the first part of the book, this section is informative and well referenced.

The third section is no less complete in its treatment of specific issues related to a variety of personnel involved with sudden death notification. Police, medical examiners, nurses, chaplains, medics, search and rescue personnel, military personnel, survivors, and workers in disaster situations are all presented in this context. Indeed, the book in part is a compilation of various protocols put forth to improve death notification for various personnel.

The fourth and final section goes through a near-exhaustive list of commonly asked questions and offers some answers and recommendations for a variety of issues surrounding sudden, unexpected death. Also in this section, a short chapter offers some information and comments related to dealing with the media. The final chapter provides suggestions for ongoing self-education and instruction to others.

The specific protocols contained in this book are:

- delivering news of sudden and unexpected death,
- telephone notification,
- notification of children,
- student death,
- death in the emergency department,
- obstetric deaths,
- US Federal Bureau of Prisons' Death Notification Protocol,
- death notification by chaplains,
- EMS in-home death notification,
- military in-the-line-of-duty death,
- US Navy death notification,
- protocol to support disaster survivors, and the
- United Airlines' Emergency Response Protocol.

This book is written by a physician who practices emergency medicine and also directs a search and rescue organization. As such, it is authoritative, and overall, is an excellent guide on the subject of death notification of survivors. It is comprehensive in its treatment of the subject, and it is extremely well referenced. It appears to leave no area untouched, and for the most part, each section of the text is discussed with sufficient detail to make the book truly substantive. Iserson's use of excerpts to emphasize various points and his effective use of tables to organize key elements and summarize topics, make this book particularly attractive.

On the downside, the book provides almost too much detail and information to absorb for a one-time, straight-through reading. One may become quickly saturated with information, necessitating that the book be put down, only to be resumed at a later time. Perhaps it is best read by first gaining an overview of the material provided in the first section, and then selectively consulting subsequent chapters as they apply to one's individual practice.

I highly recommend that this book be added to the personal library of anyone who provides service to others and who is called on to deal with sudden and unexpected deaths. ♦

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