



College of  
Policing

# Public Protection:

## Responding to a Sudden Death

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The College is committed to the promotion of equal opportunities. Every effort has been made throughout this text to avoid exclusionary language or stereotypical terms. Occasionally, to ensure clarity, it has been necessary to refer to an individual by gender.

The content of these notes may have an impact on you personally; emotive topics can generate powerful and unexpected feelings and reactions. You may have concerns about studying these topics; and wish to consider talking to an appropriate person or organisation for help, advice, and support. If you are studying these topics at home, or in a public place please ensure others are not able to view the content.

## **Authorised Professional Practice**

These notes are aimed at learners completing their Initial training to meet the learning outcomes specified on the National Policing Curriculum. The primary source of content is the Authorised Professional Practice (APP) and the supporting evidence based research of "what works" in policing.

APP can be found at: <http://www.app.college.police.uk/>

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# 1. Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to Sudden Death. These notes will enable you to describe your initial actions and individual responsibilities at the scene of any apparent death whether suspicious or not. You will be able to accurately complete the appropriate reports, identify and understand the strategies that are used when dealing with the family or friends of the deceased.

## 2. Initial Actions

### 2.1 First Aid or Confirmation of Death

In this section we will look at the procedures involved in the investigation of sudden deaths.

'Sudden death' is a police term for any death which involves some form of police action. It may not be sudden at all, in that the deceased may have been ill for some time, but because of circumstances, such as an elderly person living alone who has not been seen by a doctor for a considerable period, some enquiry is necessary. There are some occasions where the circumstances suggest that perhaps the death was not as natural or accidental as it first appears.

As the first officer at the scene, one of your primary objectives, when called to an apparent sudden death, is the protection of life. This means doing all you can to keep a person alive and not assuming death, if there is the slightest doubt you should call an ambulance. Only a doctor and, in some areas a qualified paramedic are eligible to state that a person is dead. You do not have the power to pronounce that life is extinct; you should call your control room and request that they call a doctor to the scene. Your force will have a local doctor on standby to deal with this situation.

After confirming death the doctor will indicate whether they are prepared to issue a death certificate stating the cause of death. In cases when a doctor issues a death certificate, the police involvement with the death has officially ended. In some cases the doctor may never have treated the deceased, or may not be able to tell the cause of death with any degree of certainty. In such cases you will need to inform your control room, so that supervisory officers and/or the coroner's officer can be made aware of the situation and kept informed.

## **2.2 Investigation**

If you are the first responder to a sudden death, you must note all the circumstances of the scene. You must determine whether or not the death was suspicious, check the body for signs of bruising, have a look around the room, and check if there are any signs of a struggle. Are there any open windows? signs of a forced entry? It is important to record all the details in your notebook, the position the body was in, describe the body in detail and any contact you have had with it. If there is any indication that it is a suspicious death, you will need to obtain help by contacting your supervisor. While waiting for help from your supervisor, and probably the CID and Scenes of Crime Officers (SOCOs), your action should be to preserve the possible crime scene.

It should be remembered that it is very difficult to gather evidence from a sudden death crime scene if this death had initially been treated as non-suspicious. In this circumstance the scene may have been contaminated and possible evidence lost. Therefore you should be cautious about assuming a death is non-suspicious if there is any possibility that it could actually be as the result of a crime. You should contact your supervisor if you are at all unsure of the circumstances of a sudden death.

## **2.3 Suicide**

It is not a criminal offence for a person to commit suicide. However, such deaths need to be investigated thoroughly due to the possibility of a disguised homicide.

Your initial action is the same as for any sudden death, it is important to bear in mind the following:

- the method used to commit suicide may present a danger to others, for example electricity or gas
- look for and, if possible, take possession of the means used and make note where seizure is not possible
- when the death has occurred by hanging, take care to preserve the knot in the noose when the victim is removed
- take possession of any letter left by the deceased, unopened if sealed

All items retrieved should be handed to your supervising officer, as they may be required as evidence in a coroner's court.

## **2.4 Sudden Death of a Child**

Sudden Unexpected Death in Infancy (SUDI) also referred to as Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is the unexpected and unexplained death of an apparently well baby.

In these cases your actions as a first responder are critical for the success of the investigation. There are a number of actions which you should take, these include:

- you should contact your supervisory officer and request that they attend as soon as possible
- the parents or carers may be traumatized so remember to deal with them with compassion and respect

- you need to secure any potential evidence but ensure you explain why you are doing so to the parents or carers
- you should stop anyone from washing bottles, utensils, stripping any bedding or turning on a washing machine, there may be vital evidence which could be destroyed

Further information on this topic can be found in Public Protection Level 1, Sudden Death of a Child and Child Homicide.

## **2.5 Property of the Deceased**

Whenever you respond to a sudden death, you must safeguard the deceased's property; this includes the deceased's personal property and in some cases the premises where they were found. It is important to ensure the deceased's property is safeguarded accurately as legal battles have occurred in the past. Relatives may believe there is a large sum of money or valuables in the house, when these are not found it is easy to blame people who have been in the house after the death, including you.

When you arrive at the scene you may have to take possession of personal property of the deceased, this includes when a person dies away from home or when they die in their home and there are no relatives present. If relatives are present when you arrive you can hand over responsibility for the property to them.

If you are removing valuables for safe keeping, try to make sure you have a witness and write all the details in your notebook. Valuable items of property such as cash and jewellery should be taken to the police station for safe keeping. These items should be recorded in the property register at your police station and stored until returned to relatives. Each force's procedure on returning valuable items of property to relatives can differ, please check your own force's policy.

Often you will be leaving an empty property therefore it is important to ensure it is secure and locked. If you've done any damage to the

property, because you've had to gain entry, you should contact the control room to arrange for repairs. You should contact your supervisor who will decide who should stay with the property until it is secure.

## **2.6 Identification and Completion of the Sudden Death Form**

When you respond to a sudden death you will need to identify who the deceased is. In many cases the relatives or friends of the deceased may be present and in such cases you should find the process of identification relatively easy. If there are no relatives at the scene your actions will be different. You will need to:

- find out the victims identity
- check mail and diaries to help identify the victim and their next of kin
- look for a suicide note

It is important to remember to be considerate and sympathetic when asking questions. If there are no next of kin at the scene you must also remember to get in contact with them as soon as possible, it is better to hear the news from an officer who has been trained than a local reporter or neighbour.

## **2.7 The Sudden Death Form**

Each force will have a Sudden Death form which you will need to complete, they may differ slightly but the information needed to complete them will be similar.

The essential details you need for the report are:

- name, address, date of birth and place of birth of the deceased
- any known medical history
- who found the body, as well as where and when they found it

- who pronounced the person deceased, at what time and where
- if relatives/friends have been traced
- the last person to see the deceased alive and where they were seen
- who identified the deceased, where they identified them, their address and relationship to the deceased
- next of kin
- where the body was removed to
- personal property
- evidential property
- circumstances of death
- if the SOCO has photographed and examined the scene
- if the police are treating the death as suspicious
- other agencies involved

You should make yourself familiar with the layout and the specific requirements of your own forces Sudden Death form.

## **2.8 The Coroner's Office**

A Coroner is appointed by the Secretary of State; they investigate the circumstances of a death. A Coroner must have a minimum of five years experience, either as a lawyer or a doctor of medicine. It is the coroner's office who looks into the circumstances of deaths where a doctor is unable to issue a death certificate, deaths which are unresolved or suspicious. They will have jurisdiction over the body until the circumstances have been investigated.

The coroner's officer, who may be a police officer or a civilian, helps the coroner with the investigation into the cause of death. The Sudden Death

form which contains all the relevant details is passed on to the coroner's officer as soon as possible to make any necessary arrangements.

## **3. Informing the Bereaved of a Death**

### **3.1 Preparation**

It is important to realise that your attitude and actions have a profound effect upon those with whom you come into contact, particularly at such stressful times as bereavement, and any insensitivity may make it more difficult for them to come to terms with their loss. How the news of someone's death was delivered and who told them is something they might never forget.

You should obtain as much information as you can about circumstances of the death, no matter how unpleasant the details. The bereaved will almost always prefer to know the full circumstances before reading about them in the press or hearing about it in a court.

Details of the mortuary or location of the deceased will also be needed.

An incomplete or inaccurate message will only cause more distress; the better informed you are, the more able you will be to answer questions and offer support. Do not volunteer disturbing details, but be prepared to disclose them if the bereaved seek more information. Consider whether the death was expected; in cases of road traffic collisions and many suicides it will be a great shock

You cannot assume that certain relatives are closer than others or will be more profoundly affected by the message.

Information about the circumstances of those who are told may also be valuable to you. If they are elderly, unwell or alone, it may be appropriate to contact a neighbour, friend or doctor to accompany you or to deliver the message, even though you must be present to ensure that correct information is given.

It is important to consider what might help you when you have to attend this type of incident, an understanding of how people might react when told that their relative or friend has died.

According to Dr Elisabeth Kübler-Ross who pioneered methods in the support and counselling of personal trauma, grief and grieving associated with death and dying; there are five stages of grief:

1. Denial: is a conscious or unconscious refusal to accept reality relating to the situation concerned, and is a natural defence mechanism. Some people can become locked in this stage when dealing with a traumatic change that can be ignored.
2. Anger: can manifest in different ways. People dealing with emotional upset can be angry with themselves, and/or with others, especially those close to them. Knowing this will help keep you detached and non-judgemental when experiencing the anger of someone who is very upset.
3. Bargaining: traditionally the bargaining stage for people facing death can involve attempting to bargain with whatever God the person believes in. Bargaining rarely provides a sustainable solution, especially if it's a matter of life or death.
4. Depression: also referred to as preparatory grieving. In a way it's the dress rehearsal or the practice run for the 'aftermath' although this stage means different things depending on whom it involves. It's a sort of acceptance with emotional attachment. It's natural to feel sadness and regret, fear, uncertainty, etc. It shows that the person has at least begun to accept the reality.
5. Acceptance: this stage definitely varies according to the person's situation, although broadly it is an indication that there is some emotional detachment and objectivity.

It should be noted that not everyone's experience will mirror these stages. However, it may be of benefit to be aware of these stages to enable you to understand how the reactions of relatives or friends may vary.

### **3.2 Delivering the message**

The first simple rule is that such news must be passed in person, never by telephone. Wherever possible, it should be done in private with both of you sitting down. Be prepared to obtain medical aid, especially when elderly people are involved.

The most appropriate place to deliver a death message may be at the bereaved person's home, although the circumstances may prevent this and a quiet, private place should be found. Asking people to make a journey or leaving them in a side room will lead to feelings of isolation and should be avoided. Do not leave the bereaved on their own unless they specifically request it.

The bereaved can suffer shock and may not hear all that is said, so it may be necessary to repeat yourself. Other reactions may include disbelief, denial, anger, hysteria, physical collapse and suppression of feelings.

When delivering the news it should be done with compassion, tact and without the use of jargon. The bereaved are likely to want to know if death was instant, if there was any suffering and whether the victim was aware of what was happening. They will also want to know that everything was done to try to save the deceased person's life. If you do not know the answers, tell them why, and if you can find out what they want to know, take the trouble to contact them the next day. Impersonal remarks or ill-informed opinions merely increase distress.

### **3.3 Practical Advice and Support**

Bereaved people will look to police officers for advice and help, your force may have information which they distribute to relatives who have become bereaved in these circumstances. Alternatively there are many local and national organisations that help families deal with sudden bereavement. You should find out which organisations are available in your local community. Your tutor will have this information for your force.

Before leaving, make sure the bereaved have your name, number, station, telephone number and the details of other officers involved.

### **3.4 Helping Yourself**

When informing people of a serious injury or death, or dealing with the report of a sudden death police officers often find themselves having to deal with not only the horror of the incident and the reactions of those involved, but also their own emotions.

Dealing with the trauma and suppressing your responses can cause stress. This can lead to physical and emotional problems if not spotted in time. Acknowledging this possibility, recognizing the symptoms of stress and devising strategies for coping will help you personally and may also enable you to support others more effectively.

In order to manage stress it is important to:

- Seek support, speak to someone and let them know how you are feeling.
- Connect with people, a good support network of colleagues, friends and family can help, often the activities we do with friends/family help us relax.
- Make time for socializing, exercise or relaxation. Exercise is a great stress reliever.
- Avoid unhealthy habits; don't rely on alcohol, smoking or caffeine as your ways of coping with stress. In the long term these won't solve problems, in fact they may create new ones.

## 4. Key Legislation

There is no key legislation for this topic.

## 5. E-learning

In addition to these notes the following e-learning is available via the NCALT Managed Learning Environment (MLE):

- The four chapters of the 'Sudden Death' e-learning cover investigations at the scene and considerations when delivering the death message.

The MLE is regularly updated with new learning programmes and materials.