



## Death abroad

A nationwide organisation of bereaved parents and their families



## DEATH ABROAD

When a child dies far from home, many additional problems arise. The further the distance, the greater can be the problems. You may need, or wish, to visit, so the time and cost of getting there may influence your decision to go. When there, you may be in unfamiliar surroundings. A friend or relative, who could have been able to accompany you in your home town, may not be able to do so away from it.

There can also be the complications of language. Even though you may be able to communicate adequately for holiday purposes, the matters you will have to discuss are far more complex than that.

Many of us in *The Compassionate Friends* (TCF) have suffered the loss of our son or daughter when they were far away from our home. We have become bereaved parents and suffer, like others, the pain and disbelief of the early days of grief, but there are some particular aspects to our circumstances, at least in those early days.

### When it happens

If the family is together abroad when a child dies, the shock might be in your witnessing the event causing the death, or in being part of the immediate consequences. Many of us know very little, if anything, about the procedures and laws relating to a death in our own country, let alone a foreign one. In a strange place, you have little knowledge about the local doctors, hospitals or any of the support services. You will have to rely on local people at this time. If you are fortunate, you may be able to access help from a member of the local British Consulate. Perhaps their help will be even more valuable when there are language difficulties. A problem with language is not only an added factor in describing details that must be passed on and recorded, but also when you are trying to express your feelings to local people other than in your mother tongue.

### Calling home

Even though you are still deep in shock, your thoughts will turn to people back home and how to convey your terrible news to them. It can be important deciding who to contact first, perhaps avoiding people who you know are alone, elderly or frail. If some close family or friends are able and willing to travel out to join you, you

can find this reassuring, but some people have valued a few days with their own grief before having to cope with everyone else's as well.

## The media

In conveying news of a death abroad, we have to realise, among so many other things, that speed is essential. We know that the press, radio and television networks are interested in events such as the death of a UK citizen while abroad. You can only hope that the media will act with care and consideration, checking that next of kin are informed before a full story 'breaks', but some people hear first through the news networks. This early role of the media applies to the situation when your child dies abroad and you are at home. Major disasters around the world really do capture the headlines, when tragedy comes with many killed, perhaps in an air crash, terrorist action or in a natural disaster. You may have only a vague idea that your son or daughter is on that flight or in that area, but there are painful and uncertain times until detailed news comes through. A telephone call from abroad, perhaps from one of your child's friends, or a law officer, could bring the news that will change your life. Or your local police may bring the terrible news of your child's death.

## Distance

From the start, distance itself is an obvious problem for us. The place that will now feature large in your life may be a ten-hour flight away, or have an eight-hour time difference. You may worry about exactly when your child died and have difficulty relating it to your own life. Did the death happen at 11pm (local time) or do you think of it as though he or she died when you were on your way to work the 'next day'? Strange thoughts like these can linger over the years to come when you fix the date and time of death in your memory.

Distance and language differences of course also mean extra complications in the arrangements and procedures that you need to go through. When your child dies in a country with a language unfamiliar to you, the problems and costs of translating legal documents can mount up; if the written material is not even in a European language but in Arabic or the Cyrillic alphabets, then it can not only be costly, but perhaps bewildering, or even frightening. In these circumstances, you hope to be able to trust the translations and to know that they are full and complete.

## Should you go?

Many of us quickly turn our thoughts to deciding whether or not to go out to the place where our child has died. Help could be sought from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office at home or the Consulate abroad. (See references at the end of the leaflet.) The support and encouragement of family and friends are important at this time, and your other children, if you have any, can be a strong influence on you. Your decision to go will be coloured by factors such as your finances, age, health, and dependants. The reasons that draw us to visit are varied. There may be legal matters; the people who were with your son or daughter when the death occurred may want or even need you there. You might simply feel that you *must* go. You may want and need to discover the truth of how your child died, however painful that will be to you.

## Getting there

If you do travel, your journey might be very long and tiring. In some cases your child will have been on an exciting and adventurous trip to a remote area in very difficult terrain, not a place to reach easily. Your journey can seem unreal, especially when you are in deep shock. You may have to cope with fellow passengers, innocently enquiring about your “holiday” destination. Perhaps while travelling you might still be hoping that the initial identification was wrong and the dead person had stolen your son or daughter’s passport so that a mistake had been made. Strong emotions can overcome you when you arrive and when you have to face the reality of dealing with your child’s body. Some of us have hurried out because there has been the need to deal with this speedily, and sometimes, however hard we tried, we have been too late. In some parts of the world the climate or custom demands either a prompt local burial (not at all what we might want) or embalming, or even cremation. In some cases, families should be prepared to be forced to wait until the legal formalities are completed.

If you are fortunate, family and friends rally round. Help may come from your child’s employer, school or college, your own employers, or it may come from the tour company. Sadly, however, some of us look back on these early times and feel that we were let down by agencies from whom we expected more.

## If you don’t go

For those of us who have stayed at home, there can be a long wait and there can be feelings that nothing has changed. Yet everything has. You may have to deal with post mortems, police enquiries, transport of your child's body home and, possibly, legal proceedings in a civil or a criminal court. You consider funeral arrangements even though it might not be possible to set a date, and continue to see to the basic needs of your family. Kindness and compassion from the professionals involved in all these procedures and tasks are invaluable. Travel insurance may cover the cost of bringing a body back home, but a claim could be fraught with its own difficulties if the insurance company argues about the payment. The role of an efficient and caring funeral director at each end of the journey is very important. There can be problems relating not only to arrangements for bringing the body back home but also in dealing with coroners, or their equivalents, and obtaining a death certificate. International specialists in overseas funerals and repatriation are available now and an address is given on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office leaflet referred to at the end.

## Coming home

It is not always possible for your child's body to be flown home with you when you return from your initial visit. Airlines vary in their helpfulness and by this time a coffin is regarded as 'freight'. This is hard to bear. You would want your child's body to be treated with respect to continue your parenting to the end. Those parents who have been distressed by the need for speedy cremation may feel comforted by carrying their child's ashes with them on their shared journey home.

Many bereaved parents wish to see the body of their dead child, if given the choice. However, circumstances of some deaths can mean that this is not possible; in this case there may be photos in records that you could ask to see and keep for later when you feel stronger. Again, a good funeral director would help you in this if at all possible, and may even suggest that you could touch perhaps a hand or have a lock of hair. If you have had a funeral with only immediate family present, you may choose to have a thanksgiving or memorial service later, inviting those who knew your son or daughter.

Sadly, a few families have no body to see, touch or bury. The child has not been found. This can deprive them of the chance to say goodbye and leaves questions that are unanswered.

## Why?

Distance can make finding the answers even more difficult, if not impossible. Some of us experience delay, frustration and anger when our child's death leads to legal proceedings abroad. Trials can take years to come to court and families may travel out more than once, only to have the case adjourned. In some countries, barriers may be raised against families who ask questions that imply blame. Some families are left with the strong suspicion that corruption has affected the outcome of proceedings. You will need the advice of a good, home-based lawyer with knowledge of the laws in the foreign country.

## Returning

For a time, the very name of the country where your child died can cause pain, and you try to avoid it whenever possible. However, some of us feel that we want to visit, to share our child's experiences, perhaps to understand why he or she liked the area and its people so much. If they were living abroad, we go to meet their friends and colleagues. Those of us who do pay a later visit often go with considerable apprehension, and travelling with a good friend can be a support and a comfort. You might contact the TCF International Liaison Director to see if there can be help from one of our members in the country you plan to visit. Some parents see this time as right for taking their other children to the place, so that they can fill the gaps in their understanding. On visits, items can be gathered for a 'Memory Box' that you might be creating.

## Continuing family life

If your child was married or had a partner, you would hope to build or maintain a good relationship with them. If they had children, you strongly desire to see your grandchildren grow and develop. You want to be a part of their lives and have them in yours. This might be very difficult if there are many miles between you and frequent phone calls prove expensive, but emails can be a good way of keeping in touch.

This leaflet cannot cover every set of circumstances faced by parents whose child has died abroad; but it is based on TCF's aim of helping people understand that you are not alone. We present some of the experiences of different families and look at problems faced, avoided or overcome. TCF is always grateful to hear from bereaved families.

***You may find some of the following contacts helpful:***

- ◇ **TCF** itself ([www.tcf.org.uk](http://www.tcf.org.uk) or 0345 120 3785) *can answer your queries or put you in touch with:*
- ◇ **Helpline** (0345 1 23 23 04) *on which you can speak to another bereaved parent about your worries and fears*
- ◇ **Local Contact**
- ◇ **Leaflets** *on various aspects of bereavement*
- ◇ **Postal Library** ([library@tcf.org.uk](mailto:library@tcf.org.uk) or 0345 120 3785) *for further reading matter*
- ◇ **International Liaison Director** ([international@tcf.org.uk](mailto:international@tcf.org.uk) or 01642 551 261) *who may be able to connect you with a TCF group abroad*

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**Other links**

**Foreign and Commonwealth Office** ([www.fco.gov.uk](http://www.fco.gov.uk) or 020 7008 0218) *produce a leaflet Death overseas – advice for friends and relatives, which gives information about the role of the British Consul abroad and the help available from London*

**SAMM (Support after murder and manslaughter)** ([www.samm.org.uk](http://www.samm.org.uk) or 020 7735 3838) *has a section for deaths which occur abroad*

**The Law Society** and **The Law Society of Scotland** ([www.lawsociety.org.uk](http://www.lawsociety.org.uk) or [www.lawscot.org.uk](http://www.lawscot.org.uk)) *can help with the UK side of the legal problems*

**TCF Postal Library**

Tel: 0345 120 3785

Email: [library@tcf.org.uk](mailto:library@tcf.org.uk)

**TCF**

**14 New King Street, Deptford, London SE8 3HS**

**Office 0345 120 3785**

**www.tcf.org.uk    info@tcf.org.uk**

**UK Helpline 0345 1 23 23 04**

**Northern Ireland Helpline 0288 77 88 016**

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