

THE 2019 SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DEATH, DYING AND DISPOSAL CONFERENCE



By Abi Pattenden, NAFD Immediate Past President

On behalf of the NAFD, I attended the 14th International Conference on the Social Context of Death, Dying and Disposal, held at the University of Bath in early September.

Attendees from 30 different countries came together to hear papers themed around engagement and education. I was delighted to be included as a presenter, discussing the NAFD's research on what people want from a funeral and how the inclusion of death in the education curriculum would help to achieve this by preparing children for future bereavement, regardless of when they were to experience it. This was the latest step in the NAFD's ongoing 'Bereavement in Childhood' project.

Attendance at the Conference enabled me to attend presentations on a wide variety of topics, some very closely related to my own - such as how picture books are useful in explaining death and dying to children, a proposed 'death education' programme in Poland and how the media can be taken advantage of in educating the public about death. Others were less related but still fascinating - a talk about 'terminal lucidity' from a Japanese scholar, about sudden moments of clarity or improvement in condition as someone approaches death. This really resonated with my own experiences and the anecdotes which clients have shared with me, over the time I have been working as a funeral director.

Many sessions ran concurrently, and it was often hard to choose which was of most interest, but there were also several plenary sessions which

were a great opportunity for the whole cohort to come together. For me, one of the highlights was the first of these, delivered by Professor Dame Sue Black, who is a forensic anthropologist based at Lancaster University. Her talk covered how she had come to her profession, some of the most memorable cases she had worked on (including during the Kosovan and Syrian conflicts as well as individual deaths) and the role that her profession has in identifying people, and how the human tendency to modify our body can be helpful in this respect. It was often humorous - in fact, surprisingly so - but also very moving.

The keynote address at the Conference was delivered by Simon Cox, Head of Insight at Dignity, who were also the principal sponsor and organised a drinks reception at the Roman Baths on the Thursday evening. He took us through current challenges the funeral industry is facing, asking whether the developments that are likely to take place will represent evolution or revolution for the sector. He identified six possible future segments for funerals, those that are traditional, celebrational, personal and digital, and those where the identification of the client as a 'rebel' or 'vulnerable' is a key differentiator. A lively audience debate followed.

The Conference was accompanied by an art exhibit, with photos and

drawings of skulls, and a poster display where presenters and others had created visual depictions of their work. This was particularly interesting because it gave me the opportunity to consider some new ideas in detail, such as the activity of repatriating a body and how that fits in with the idea of the funeral as a ritual.

I have been aware for a while that there are people who take an academic interest in issues surrounding death and bereavement but, to see this large group of people - some of whom had travelled from as far away as New Zealand, Japan, and South America - was a bit overwhelming. Some of the papers were about ostensibly quite detailed concepts - for example, how can, or should, alkaline hydrolysis market itself for best success - and, to see them given such a close focus and to find there were people devoting their life's research to exploring these details. I have an academic background and so I know people will choose specific and distinct ideas for their work, but I had never thought about how much there was to discuss in death.

I received a warm welcome from the DDD community who were delighted that someone representing the NAFD was able to join them (our CEO, Jon Levett, also attended sessions on Friday) and to present. There was a willingness to encourage collaborative working between funeral directors and death studies academics, and I hope to be able to return and learn more in future years.



▲ Professor Dame Sue Black