



# Hidden Victims

*Brigitte Chaudhry* describes the dismissive treatment of the relatives of road accident victims and why they have set up their own support organisation. *Based on speech at launch*

A road death is not like a normal death. It is a violent death — as violent as murder, and, like murder, totally unexpected. The bereaved need help, care and support at such a terrible time, especially as they face unfamiliar procedures — inquests, investigations and hearings — where knowledge of what is going on, and what their rights are, can prevent further suffering.

Although well-structured support is almost automatically available to victims in other situations, the victims of road death seem to be totally ignored: they are left without any assistance — sympathy even — without proper information of how their loved ones died, and, apparently, without any rights. The often totally innocent death of a loved one appears to be a matter of little or no importance: this diminishes them, their life appearing to be devalued because a motor vehicle was the weapon.

In perhaps the majority of cases someone has caused that death by breaking the law, yet relatives are expected to accept the occurrence as 'an accident', and not to expect a proper investigation, information about proceedings, or a serious prosecution of the driver responsible for the death. If they protest they are dismissed as vindictive and accused of being vengeful.

Not only are they faced with the horrendous

fact of a loved one's — often their child's — violent death, but with an attitude to those deaths which borders on the obscene and which cannot possibly be acceptable in a civilised society. This leaves the bereaved shocked and bewildered; it also causes deep emotional wounds.

When my only son, Mansoor, was killed in October 1990 by a van driver who had driven through red lights, I was horrified at the casual attitude to his innocent death. Until then I had believed that a death caused by another person would be followed by outrage and treated with the utmost seriousness. Yet there was no trace of outrage at my son's horrendous death, indeed several police Inspectors told me that as 'everyone drives through red, this is only careless'. A summary charge for a minor traffic offence, which totally ignored my son's death, was duly proposed. I felt compelled to take some action — I wrote letters, protested, approached those in positions of responsibility — all to no avail.

Seven months after Mansoor's death — during which time I was unaware that what I had had to go through was suffered by others too — I found out about a bereavement group for parents, The Compassionate Friends, and attended their annual conference in June 1991. There I met parents in a similar situation: there

was no doubt in our minds that an organisation representing families of victims killed by all forms of dangerous driving needed to be established. Some of those parents are now committee members of the organisation that was set up as a result of that recognition — RoadPeace.

Our first get-together was in September 1991 — around my dining table, before it became cluttered with files and papers. In order to get in touch with more victim families, letters were distributed with The Compassionate Friends Newsletter and sent to newspapers.

The moving, often heart-rending replies received, convinced us that we had to do something, that it is cruel to leave the bereaved without any support, and that action had to be taken to put an end to the great number of preventable deaths.

An old lady in her seventies, Dorothy Taylor, was moved to write to me some forty years after her mother's death, because she had never come to terms with its manner and believed that her father's own death was not unconnected: 'I lost my dear beloved mum many years ago, when she was knocked down in the road by a young learner driver who was out on his own. She was hit and carried along on the bonnet of the car and then dropped in the

road to die. She was only 67 and had six children. She had worked so hard in her life to bring us all up, she did not deserve that sort of death. My dear dad just lived four years after mum, he died of cancer'.

All the letters received highlighted countless sources of suffering in addition to the loss: the lack of information available; the anomaly whereby 'bereavement allowances' do not apply in the case of children over 18 — requiring a new case to be brought by the bereaved against the insurance company, even in the case of a guilty-plea or a guilty-verdict; the often insulting treatment of the death by the police, solicitors, courts, hospitals — even just after the death.

Here are a few quotations from some of those many letters:

'We have just received a letter from our solicitor to say that our son Richard was worth nothing. We take it as an insult to him and ourselves. No amount of money will ever replace him, but surely there should be a set amount of compensation given to the next of kin . . . Our son was a person, a nice one at that. It's like saying all the love and pride you put into raising them is worthless . . .'

'I felt that our rights as parents and our son's right for justice were nowhere to be found. We were supposed to disappear in the background and not to question anything and not to expect to be given any answers. The grief, loss and hurt will never go away, but we are made to feel that to point this out is an imposition . . .'

'The driver has had every court case adjourned through various reasons, in fact one date was set and my husband and I turned up at the court, heart-broken as you must know yourself, only to find it had been adjourned and that no-one had thought to even let us know. When it did go to court, he was fined £50 with £75 costs. He has appealed against his sentence and again it has been adjourned twice. So far they have never once mentioned Wendy in the trials . . .'

'As you will see, I received no support after Tony's death and none of us knew really what to do. For a family to be allowed to leave a hospital after seeing the body of their loved one in the mortuary and not being given any advice, words of consolation, a cup of tea to steady their nerves, was, and still is beyond belief . . .'

In all we received nearly 200 letters. After that, I prepared a questionnaire to try to establish the exact areas of need. These questionnaires, I am told, make up the only investigation of its type. The evidence from them has been taken by our representative to the Working Party into Road Deaths, presently convened by Victim Support. It constitutes the

only documentary evidence from the victims themselves. Even then, it is difficult for the members of that Working Party — the majority of whom are neither victims nor victim representatives — to believe the facts placed before them: we know them to be true.

In February 1992 we named our organisation and established a telephone Helpline. We took care in writing our constitution, kept in touch with victim families and supported those newly bereaved who happened to hear about us. The money needed for this came from the committee, with an initial £1000 from the sale of my son's music equipment. We were also increasingly supported with donations from victim families. In this way we have survived until today.

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After establishing the Helpline, we had leaflets printed which are being handed to victim families. What we must achieve, to stop the often cruel treatment of victim families, is the setting up of a referral system adhered to by every single Police Force — we hope that it will not take too long to bring such a system into operation.

RoadPeace is now a member of the European Federation of Road Crash Victim Families, and is one of ten organisations from seven European countries belonging to that Federation. Recently we have taken part in a study into the effect of road deaths on victim families. We are finding that the effects are often long-term, and are not currently measured or included in the £700,000 every road death is said to cost.

On 7th April, the day dedicated by the World Health Organisation to the Prevention of Accidents and Injuries, RoadPeace had its Public Launch — choosing this day to highlight the fact that the majority of road fatalities are preventable. We want those in positions of responsibility to take action to halt these deaths and to stop other families being needlessly bereaved.

Only ten days before, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Security, Virginia Bottomley, addressed a conference on the subject of cot deaths. She stated the following:

'The death of a baby is a cruel tragedy for a family. Sadly, not every death can be pre-

vented, whatever is done and however good the quality of care. But we can do better. If there are avoidable factors which may contribute to death, then we have a duty to discover those avoidable factors and to take action.'

Yet, it seems, thousands of children, teenagers and adults are allowed to be slaughtered on our roads. We now urge Mrs. Bottomley and all other ministers, as well as all responsible bodies, to take action in respect of these thousands of preventable deaths and the many hundreds of thousands of preventable injuries on the road. There are countless avoidable factors which don't even need to be discovered.

We are told of marvellous improvements in the fatality statistics, but continue to learn daily of people killed and injured through acts of gross negligence, incompetence and irresponsibility by drivers in charge of a lethal weapon. When accompanying families to court, RoadPeace members continue to suffer with them the unbelievably casual treatment of their loved ones' deaths. It is with great astonishment that we read news items such as the announcement by the Warwickshire Chief Constable that a 41 m.p.h. speed in a 30 m.p.h. area was a minor speeding offence to be treated with a caution, and that, in future, resources will be concentrated on solving burglaries whilst offending motorists would be treated with 'compassion and patience'.

We very much hope that other constabularies will not follow this 'philosophical switch'; that police forces will treat road deaths with the seriousness due to every death, and apply utmost strictness in enforcing the law in order to prevent death and injury on our roads. Not only for the sake of the bereaved and affected families, but for the benefit of society as a whole.

For our part, RoadPeace, with the help of everyone concerned with road deaths, will continue to offer support to those unfortunate to be bereaved, so that they are not left filled with resentment and bitterness at being left without help when it was most needed. A fellow bereaved parent, a father, wrote with the following encouraging words:

'When my son died, I did not believe that any other human being could possibly help me or make any difference to the way I felt. It did not occur to me to ask for help from anyone. There must be thousands of people in the same frame of mind. Hopefully, with the sort of practical help you are offering the bereaved, they will start to feel understood by the community, less isolated and therefore better able to adjust to a completely new life, with different priorities, beliefs and attitudes. I am not anything like the man I was before my son's death, and all of the good results are due to the help I have received from fellow bereaved.'

A road death is *not* a normal death. □

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