

A framework for managing the sudden, unexpected death of a colleague in primary care

A framework
for managing
the **sudden and
unexpected death
of a colleague** in a
primary care setting

December 2024



Authors: Professor Gail Kinman and Dr. Rebecca Torry

Download guide here

https://www.som.org.uk/sites/som.org.uk/files/civicrm/persist/contribute/files/Framework_for_managing_sudden_and_unexpected_death_of_a_colleague_in_primary_care_Dec2024.pdf

Background



The sudden death of a work colleague can be shocking, distressing and destabilising

A compassionate and supportive approach is needed to help people and organisations recover

“The right person at the right time in the right place”



A 'postvention' framework

“The actions taken by an organisation to provide support after a colleague’s death in an effective and sensitive way.”

It aims to:

- Provide appropriate information, avoiding inaccuracies or rumours
- Offer staff support to deal with grief and difficult emotions
- Stabilise the environment, restoring some order and routine

This guide provides a flexible framework highlighting key actions and support needs at different stages – the first day, week, month and longer term



The first day: disclosure, shock, communication, support



The first **day**: key actions

- Arranging a coordinated discussion on the information that should be provided to staff, liaising with the family if appropriate.
- Breaking the news to all members of staff in a quiet environment and ensuring people who are not on duty are also aware.
- Dealing with the distress of staff members.
- Ensuring there is time and space to debrief and for staff to support one another.
- Identifying any member of staff who is too distressed to continue working and encouraging them to take time out if they need it. This may require probing questions and/or asking other staff members for their opinions on colleagues' wellbeing.
- Contacting the ICB and the PCN to share the information and seek urgent support.
- Contacting RCGP Sudden Bereavement Support.
- Assessing the staffing situation: reallocating work or finding cover to ensure service is not disrupted.
- Identifying the concessions that could be made available in the first few days and weeks if staff members are struggling.
- Identifying potential sources of support for the future.

“We sat in silence for a while, then began to work out how to break the news”

“There was no guidance. Suddenly, I was in charge of everyone’s feelings and was expected to carry on as normal.”

The first week: communication, coordination, continuing support



The first **week**: key actions

- Identifying relevant external bodies to inform of the person's death and making contact.
- Involving all relevant staff in deciding how to break the news to patients.
- Breaking the news to patients, dealing with their distress and determining who might need additional support.
- Dealing with the continued distress of staff and identifying anybody who is struggling.
- Ensuring there are continuing opportunities and a physical space for staff to get mutual support.
- Placing a memorial in reception, e.g. flowers, a poster or a memorial book for patients to write their tributes. Deciding whether to provide a memorial on the practice website.
- Nominating someone to liaise with the family about the funeral arrangements and deciding who should attend.
- Liaising with the Integrated Care Board (ICB) if the practice is to close for a half-day for the funeral or, if this is not possible, providing cover so colleagues can attend.
- Organising a memorial event for all staff if required.
- Dealing with personal belongings and returning them to the family in accordance with their wishes.
- Managing IT issues.

“We made a poster and got a condolence book. One of the team put flowers in our colleague’s room.”

The first month: getting the 'right' kind of support, working towards recovery



The first **month**: key actions

- Assessing the risks to the short-term and longer-term functioning of the practice.
- Ensuring opportunities for the team to meet and offer mutual support.
- Dealing with any continuing distress and emotional responses such as guilt and anger.
- Recognising that staff will have different emotional experiences at different stages, so an individual rather than a collective approach to support is required.
- Signposting people who may be experiencing protracted, more serious emotional distress to external support.
- Agreeing on a consistent approach to ongoing communications with patients.

“We did a good job of supporting each other.”

“We needed somebody to put their arm around the practice”

Longer term: vigilance, continued support, remembrance



Longer term: key actions

- Ensuring there are opportunities for continuing support among the team that meet individual needs.
- Being aware of how distress might manifest itself over the longer term and remaining vigilant for signs of difficulty.
- Balancing the loss with the need to resume 'business as usual', while ensuring expectations of the team are realistic.
- Highlighting the need for self-compassion and self-care for all team members, including leaders.
- Deciding how to remember the colleague who has died over the longer term.

“We paid tribute to our friend, as a doctor and as a colleague. People read out tributes from the condolence book”