

help us to understand the events, as they had been told them, that led to our son's accidental death on a ski slope in Switzerland.

Only now, in retrospect, can I appreciate the feelings of those two officers, one young and one older and most likely a father. They tried to be helpful.

We found out that they had gone to several houses looking for a neighbour to accompany them. The facts were not accurate because the news had come via teletype from Europe, but they did have a contact we could telephone in Geneva, Switzerland.

As uncomfortable as they were, they asked if they could call a friend, a relative or a clergyman for us. They also waited until our clergyman and a close friend arrived.

Those two fine men did all they could for us. They had been well trained and well selected for the delivery of such devastating news. Only later through my involvement with Bereaved Families of Ontario did I find out that is not always the case.

Many families are not treated as compassionately as we were. All too often, the men sent to deliver the message have incomplete and inaccurate information, are in a hurry or misunderstand the reactions of the family.

I can't do anything or offer much assistance as to the verification of facts or the preparation of the officers who deliver the messages, but I hope I can help you understand the feeling of parents who are told in four words — your child is dead — that their world has crumbled.

You might interpret their silence as not caring. Silence is the inability to validate the news by speaking of it. To ask a question about details would be to admit it has happened.

You might misunderstand their anger and feel their rage is against you. This too is only misdirected anger at the turn of events that led to the death. The bearer of the news is the natural target.

You may have been told to stay and the family wishes you would leave. After all, your being there validates the news. Don't feel they want you to leave so they can get on to other things. The news is so overwhelming often the tears are frozen inside.

Some people want to be held, while others can't stop talking. Some parents want to see their dead child — some can't bear to look. All are normal and appropriate reactions.

How then, one might wonder, could a police officer help when the reactions are so diverse and the needs of families so different.

Through my own experience and in talking to parents whose experience differed from mine, I have formed these conclusions — the do's and don't's of delivering compassionate messages. They are meant to be helpful and not a criticism of present practice.

- 1. Do make certain the parent (wife, child) is not alone. Ask a neighbour, if available, to accompany you.**
- 2. Have all the facts available with you. These are very important to help families accept the news.**
- 3. Help telephone clergy, friends, relatives.**
- 4. Be prepared to stay and talk about the events leading to the death if possible.**
- 5. If the news is delivered other than at home, offer transportation home to the family.**