

## Immediate Bereavement Experiences when a Parent of Dependent Children has Died of Cancer: Funeral Directors' Perspectives.

### Abstract

When a parent of dependent children dies, families are often unsure if and how children could be part of the immediate bereavement period. Children excluded can be more susceptible to negative outcomes. In-depth interviews explored funeral directors' ( $n=23$ ) experiences of providing a service to families in the immediate bereavement period, when a parent dies from cancer. Findings highlighted funeral directors can have an important role in guiding families through the distressing immediate bereavement period. Societal shifts are influencing this period, especially the funeral. Recommendations are discussed surrounding a pastoral role of the funeral director in the immediate bereavement period.

### Introduction

Whilst death is commonly associated with old age; there is an increase in younger adults dying who have dependent children, <18 years old (Parsons, 2011). Where the death of a parent with dependent children is expected from cancer, ideally the reality of the parent's declining health should be openly discussed within the family (Fearnley & Boland, 2019; Hanna et al., 2019; Sheehen & Draucker, 2011). The level of open communication varies between families, and children are often ill-prepared or unaware their parent is going to die from cancer (Beale et al., 2004).

Despite varying levels of preparations for children when a parent is dying from cancer, families, particularly the bereaved parent encounter new challenges when the ill-parent has just died (McClatchey, 2018). The bereaved parent, or other significant adult in the child's life are then confronted with the highly emotive and challenging task of supporting the children at this distressing time of death (Sheehan et al., 2019) and the immediate bereavement period that follows. The immediate bereavement period is referred to as from the moment an individual has died until the funeral has taken place.

In recent years Ireland has become increasingly secular and ideologically more diverse (O'Flaherty et al., 2018). Nonetheless, it remains one of the most Christian countries in western Europe, where four out of five Irish people identify themselves as Christian, with 50% of whom

identifying as non-practicing (Pew Research Center, 2018). However, when families encounter the death of their loved one, customary rituals often prevail (Walter, 1994). In Ireland, traditionally the home becomes ‘the wake house’ during the immediate bereavement period where friends and family alike gather, usually sharing memories and stories about the deceased (McCarthy, 2016). Following the death, the funeral director brings the deceased body into their care, and is prepared for the coffin at the funeral director’s place of work. Usually the body is returned to the home in the coffin by the funeral director; and remains there until the night before or day of the funeral. However, in recent years there has been a shift towards the body remaining at the funeral parlour (McCarthy, 2016). It has become practice in Ireland for the funeral of an individual to be around the third day after death.

Newly bereaved parents are often unsure how to navigate the immediate bereavement period with their dependent children (Schonfeld et al., 2016). Despite a child’s desire to be part of the decision-making and rituals that follow (Weller et al., 1988), families often feel it is protecting the children by excluding them from the planning and delivery of their parent’s funeral (Silverman, 2013). Studies have reported that children excluded during the immediate bereavement period are more susceptible to feelings of regret, anger, hurt and frustration than those children included (Holland, 2004; Paul, 2013).

Researchers from the Harvard Medical School Child Bereavement Study reported to facilitate a better grief experience for children it is important for them to ‘maintain a relationship’ with their parent that has died (Silverman & Nickman, 1996; Silverman et al., 1992; Silverman & Worden, 1992); often referred to as ‘continuing bonds’ (Karydi, 2018). Protective factors highlighted to promote continuing bonds between a child and the recently deceased parent during the immediate bereavement period have included: listening to and sharing of stories regarding the dead parent during the wake (Haine et al., 2008), writing poems or letters and placing these inside the coffin with the parent (Faro, 2018; Holland, 2004; Mahon, 2009; Sjøfting et al., 2016), as well as choosing the flowers or music for the funeral service (Holland, 2004; Mahon, 2009; Sjøfting et al., 2016). Other studies have reported involving children in the immediate bereavement period helps them understand the finality of death (Christ, 2000) and feel valued as a family member (Sjøfting et al., 2016; Worden, 1996), which can help facilitate better adjustment and coping into adulthood

(Christ, 2000; Faro, 2018; Fristad et al., 2000; Holland, 2004; Saldinger et al., 2004; Søvting et al., 2016; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Weller et al., 1988; Worden, 1996). These studies highlight a need for families to be reassured and, or encouraged to involve the children throughout the immediate bereavement period.

Funeral directors are centrally involved in organising and conducting nearly all funerals in Ireland, and work closely alongside the bereaved family during the immediate bereavement period (Holloway et al., 2013). Also, funeral directors are usually the only ‘professional’ consistently present within the family home over the course of the three day period. Funeral directors have been identified as having an important role within the North American funeral practice to providing families with direction in preparing and involving the children during the immediate bereavement period (Mahon, 2009). In Australia, funeral directors have been identified as one of the most prevalent forms of bereavement support to families (Aoun et al., 2018). However, in some countries (including Northern Ireland), funeral directing is not a regulated profession and lacks an accountability structure regarding standards of service provision (Valentine et al., 2013). Although Howarth (1996) noted funeral directors have a role in advising bereaved adults on how to arrange and prepare for the funeral of a loved one, it is unclear if funeral directors perceive it is their role to extend this care and support to families in relation to the children, when a parent of dependent children has died.

Exploration of funeral directors’ experiences of providing a service to bereaved families may offer insight to the challenges faced by newly bereaved parents, as they manage the distressing immediate bereavement period with their dependent children. Also, it will aid our understanding of the role a funeral director can have in supporting a bereaved family through the emotional immediate bereavement period, when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer.

### **Aims and objectives**

The current study aims to explore funeral directors' experience and perceptions of providing a service to families when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer. The objectives are to explore:

- (1) funeral directors' experiences of providing care and support to families when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer,
- (2) funeral directors' perceptions of the challenges encountered by the bereaved parent when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer, and
- (3) funeral directors' perceptions of good practice for families when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer.

## **Methods**

### ***Participants***

Twenty-three funeral directors from Northern Ireland participated in the study between November 2018 and March 2019. Initially, convenience sampling recruited funeral directors from private limited companies, where it was suggested that the service provided by funeral directors varied between private and public limited companies. *Private limited companies where small businesses and the funeral directors were usually made up of family members. Public limited companies where large practices or franchises made up of multiple funeral directors.* It was also reported by funeral directors that the support needs of families following the death of a parent were perceived to be different in urban compared to rural communities. Subsequently, purposive sampling was deployed to ensure representations of funeral directors from private and public limited companies within rural and urban communities.

Eligible participants were contacted by the first author via telephone and provided with oral information regarding the study. *Participants were informed the study would explore their professional experience and involvement in working with families, when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer. A total of 15 potential participants declined the invitation. Explanations for non-participation included a lack of availability and perceptions of having a lack of professional experience to meaningfully take part.*

### ***Data collection***

Data were collected by means of semi-structured in-depth interviews. *This method is considered most appropriate for providing rich data surrounding an individual's experience (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). A topic guide was developed, informed by the literature, the study's*

aims and objectives and the research group. Open-ended questions included: “can you tell me about your experience of working alongside families when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer?”, “what do you see as challenging for families in the immediate bereavement period when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer?”, and “what has been your professional role when providing a service to families in the immediate bereavement period when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer?”. Follow-up probes were used to gather more detail on funeral directors’ experiences and perceptions, such as “what happened then” and “can you tell me more about that”.

The guide was iteratively modified as categories were identified. Additional topics included: a family’s struggle to sharing information with young children during the immediate bereavement period and generational shifts towards the immediate bereavement period when a young parent has died from cancer.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by the first author and some were co-facilitated with the second and third author. The authors had no prior relationships with the participants. Interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 30 and 50 minutes at the participant’s place of work.

### ***Data analysis***

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis framework was used to interpret the data. Deployed as an inductive method, the process of identifying themes in the study were derived from the data (Maguire & Dalahunt, 2017). Initially, the first author read and reread the transcripts to gain a sense of each participant’s story (Braun et al., 2019). Audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim by the first author. Following line by line scrutiny of the transcripts, the first author coded the data using NVivo V12. As an inductive process, open coding was used and codes were developed by marking similar phrases or words in the participants’ narratives. To enhance validity, the codes were independently analysed and discussed with the third author which resulted in two codes being renamed. Following the coding of the data, the first author collated the codes and identified where some of them merged into themes. Due to overlap between the themes, these were reviewed and discussed with the third author, resulting in the removal of one broad theme. To ensure rigour,

credibility and trustworthiness, codes and themes were independently analysed by the second co-author. Themes were verified and refined through critical dialogue with all authors.

### ***Ethical considerations***

Participants received oral and written information about the study and provided written informed consent. Assurances of confidentiality were given and data protection procedures were observed to protect participants. Ethical approvals were obtained at institutional and national levels [REC:17/SW/0155].

### **Results**

Participants recruited consisted of funeral directors from private limited companies ( $n15$ ) and public limited companies ( $n8$ ), between rural ( $n13$ ) and urban ( $n10$ ) communities. All participants had at least two years' experience as a funeral director ( $mAvg = 24years$ ,  $range = 2-54 years$ ). Sample characteristics can be found in Table 1.

[Table 1 near here]

Overall, three descriptive themes were identified from the data, further categorised into three broad themes: (1) funeral directors' perceptions of challenges experienced by families surrounding the time of parental death, (2) funeral directors' perceived role in navigating the family through the immediate bereavement period and (3) societal shifts influencing the immediate bereavement period when a parent dies from cancer.

### ***Funeral directors' perceptions of challenges experienced by families surrounding the time of parental death***

It was reported that families (particularly the bereaved parent) varied in ability to cope and navigate the immediate bereavement period with their children. Funeral directors stated some families had invested time before the death, where the children had been informed and regularly updated on the changing nature of their parent's declining health. On occasions, the children had been part of conversations surrounding the forthcoming death of their mum or dad and funeral arrangements. Other families were reported by funeral directors as less prepared for the parent's

death, and were uncertain how to self-manage the immediate bereavement period with the children. The data highlighted uncertainties faced by many families, as observed by funeral directors in the immediate bereavement period when a parent has died from cancer.

*The distress and uncertainties that the death of a parent poses during the immediate bereavement period for families*

Before face-to-face contact between the funeral director and the family it was reported some bereaved parents had struggled with finding the appropriate language to tell young children (up to 12 years old) that their mum or dad had died. Many funeral directors reported that parents told young children ideas such as their parent going to heaven, or becoming an angel or a star. Funeral directors stated euphemisms such as ‘angel’ or ‘star’ appeared to be ambiguous for some young children and perceived it good practice for parents to use clear language, ensuring the child understood the permanency of death.

*“time and time again I hear children saying ‘my mummy is an angel’. and while that’s all lovely and nice, the child then thinks mummy will come back and live with them as this angel. kids need to know that death is irreversible.” [funeral director interview 15]*

Funeral directors often described the immediate bereavement period as chaotic for the newly bereaved family, as it was usually their first experience of an immediate family member’s death. Consequently, the family were often unsure of the logistics surrounding the immediate bereavement period. In addition to the practicalities, one of the greatest challenges perceived by funeral directors adding to newly bereaved parents heightened distress was how best to support the needs of the children.

*“I got to the home and everybody was in a state. I think it is fair to say that the adults generally were a bit lost and didn’t know what to do with the kids” [funeral director interview 02]*

The funeral director usually met with the family shortly after the death to discuss ‘arrangements’. This provided an opportunity (and in some cases the only time these conversations took

place) to make preparations for the immediate bereavement period, including the funeral. Bereaved parents were often described by funeral directors as uncertain as to whether the children should be present when funeral arrangements were being made. While some parents were reported to have already decided how their children would be involved, others were reported to have sought reassurance and direction from the funeral director concerning their child's participation on key aspects of the immediate bereavement period. This included the bereaved parent's uncertainty surrounding their child's involvement in the home during the wake, or if the young children should attend the church, crematorium or graveyard on the day of the funeral. Also, funeral directors perceived many bereaved parents were unsure if bringing the body home would expose the children to heightened levels of distress.

*“it's usually us (funeral directors) asking the questions about what a family want for a funeral, but when I've been sitting in the home of a young family, they are the ones asking us the questions. they (the bereaved parent) are beside themselves. the kids are the forefront of their mind and they are searching for answers as to how they are going to get through the next few days with the kids. they're looking to us for that guidance” [funeral director interview 17]*

While many families impacted by divorce or separation were reported to ‘come together in their grief’, some funeral directors described heightened levels of conflict was evident amongst others. Factors perceived to contribute towards tension and conflict included a previously absent parent ‘taking over’ parenting or the presence of a new partner (step-parents). Funeral directors perceived these family dynamics often led to anger and resentment from the children (typically teenagers, aged 13-18) and other family members. In such situations, some funeral directors perceived their role was to facilitate dialogue within the family to ‘calm’ the situation and provide the whole family (children and adults) with ownership in the planning and delivery of the funeral. Other funeral directors were not involved to this depth and focused on planning the funeral with the key family members. These funeral directors perceived intervening would have been inappropriate as it was ‘a family matter’. Funeral directors perceived ‘family functioning’ was promoted when funeral plans were discussed with the dying parent before the death occurred.



*“like many families, they had their own baggage. I didn't want to find myself stuck in the middle of it. at the end of the day I was there to get the funeral planned. I wasn't there to be a mediator for the family. that's something they had to work out amongst themselves” [funeral director interview 25]*

Death was described as difficult for any family. However, funeral directors described observing a more emotionally charged and ‘raw’ situation when a parent of dependent children has died compared to that of an older person. For instance, funeral directors stated a greater degree of personal distress when working with families when a parent of dependent children has died. Some of these funeral directors were parents or grandparents of dependent children and stated how they often thought ‘what if this happened to my family’, transferring the pain experienced by newly bereaved young families. Also, funeral directors reported feeling upset at the thought of a parent missing out on their children ‘growing-up’ and important milestones in life. Often, funeral directors described a lack of opportunity to offload this emotional impact of the funeral director role.

*“you can't help but put yourself in their shoes and think what if I or my husband had to go through this pain. so many times I've left the home of these young families and came back to the office just bawling my eyes out. they are just horrendous situations.” [funeral director interview 14]*

### ***Funeral directors' perceived role in navigating the family through the immediate bereavement period***

There was a wide variety and range of ‘professional input’ from the funeral director. There appeared to be no differences between the funeral director role in relation to the funeral director's gender, company type (private or public limited company) or location (rural or urban). Some funeral directors described their role as providing a service in coordinating the planning and logistics of a funeral. Often, these funeral directors did not perceive it was their ‘professional’ role to help families navigate the immediate bereavement period with dependent children. Factors contributing towards these perceptions included: a fear of interfering which may cause further distress to a bereaved family's situation, and feeling they (the funeral director) were not in a position to influence parents on how to navigate the immediate bereavement period with their children. Also, some

funeral directors described the funeral director role as demanding, often dictated by imminent timelines. For example, decisions regarding a funeral are often made within a period of two hours so newspaper notices can be submitted on-time, or funeral directors have other commitments such as another funeral to coordinate or a second job.

*“I could get a call out at 9 o’clock in the morning and have another funeral to conduct at noon. that gives me three hours to get the planning done and be ready for the next funeral. there’s a limit on what we can to do” [funeral director interview 19]*

Other funeral directors perceived the funeral director role as wider, to include providing families with appropriate reassurance and direction as the family navigated through an unfamiliar and highly emotive experience. Often as parents themselves, funeral directors wanted to help these parents as best as they could at an emotionally difficult time. Also, funeral directors considered this was an integral aspect of high-quality service that funeral directors should provide, while simultaneously promoting company reputation and maintaining competitive in the business. Funeral director input was predominately based on previous experience in the ‘professional’ role as a funeral director; as they stated having no specific education or training on how to support families with dependent children during the immediate bereavement period. The role of the funeral director during the immediate bereavement period is further discussed under two sub-themes: (1) preparation to view the parent in the coffin and (2) involving children in the funeral.

#### *Preparation to view the parent in the coffin*

Most funeral directors stated it was good practice for bereaved parents to encourage children to see their mum or dad in the coffin. Based on previous experience, many funeral directors perceived it would contribute towards the child's understanding and acceptance of the death. However, funeral directors often stated bereaved parents sought advice to prepare the children (usually young children) for viewing their parent in the coffin. Some funeral directors suggested they advised the parent to provide children with factual details of the process of what they will see. For example, it is in most cases a wooden box known as a coffin which will be brought home in a ‘long black special car’ called a hearse, or will remain in the funeral parlour. Then, explaining what their mum or dad will be wearing to which some children may have already chosen, and how the body

will look, feel (cold, firm, perhaps jaundiced or blue lips) and be positioned. This detailed preparation was suggested to facilitate reassurance to the child's understanding that the person in the coffin is their parent.

*“It's just about being truthful and saying this is how they'll (the deceased parent) look. you're not telling them any lies and therefore they'll (the children) be prepared for what they are going to see” [funeral director interview 04]*

A small number of funeral directors perceived it was their role to be present when families were having this conversation with young children, so they (the funeral director) could answer any difficult questions the children may pose. Other funeral directors simply discussed the practicalities of the immediate bereavement period and did not participate in this depth of conversation with families.

In preparation for viewing, some funeral directors felt they had a key role in ensuring the parent would look, as much as possible, as to how the child would remember them. For instance, some funeral directors would ask for a photograph of the parent that has died, or ask the bereaved parent to view the body before the children, to take small details into consideration such as the parent's hair or wearing glasses. For young children, funeral directors ensured there were chairs or stools in the room with soft furnishings such as toys. This was to allow the children to have a comprehensive view of their mum or dad, representing how they typically would see their parent in a sensitive environment.

*“we want it to be a good experience particularly where young children are present. we don't want children to be walking into this cold room. we always make sure there's toys or teddy's lying around. it makes it that bit less terrifying” [funeral director interview 12]*

To facilitate coping, some funeral directors suggested it appeared helpful for children (typically young children) to add something in the coffin with their parent. This was suggested by funeral directors to provide children with a purpose to view, and promote the feelings of comfort

and connection that a bit of them would be with the parent where they would go. Examples outlined by funeral directors included handmade cards, photographs, drawings, or a teddy.

*“to me that’s a real big benefit. they’re sending this message or picture away with their mummy or daddy and probably helps them in their grief” [funeral director interview 05]*

### *Involving children in funeral*

As families prepared for the funeral, many funeral directors reported bereaved parents were often uncertain of how best to involve their children. Funeral directors stated children (especially young children) are often not included when funeral plans are being discussed between the funeral director and the family. Many funeral directors perceived children should be involved in the planning of the funeral, as a means of providing them with ownership and belonging. However, only some funeral directors reported actively offering this suggestion or encouraging the bereaved parent to include the children in the planning and delivery of the funeral. From experiences of including children, funeral directors stated they could see the benefit for children choosing flowers and music for the funeral service, or the outfit the deceased parent was wearing in the coffin. This was reported by funeral directors to help the children keep connected to the dead parent and part of ‘saying goodbye’.

*“last week I was walking down the street and this chap came up to me. I hadn’t a clue who he was, sure we meet so many people in the job. anyhow he told me I was the funeral director when his mum died some 10 years ago. and he thanked me for all I done during the time of the funeral and how that was helpful for him. that gives me comfort in what I’m suggesting to these families is a good thing” [funeral director interview 16]*

Many funeral directors reported that children often have not attended a funeral before and have little understanding regarding ‘how it will be’. To prepare children for their parent’s funeral, some funeral directors reported it was useful for children (usually young children) to view the funeral home, crematorium or graveyard in advance and talk through the service. Funeral directors suggested this was helpful in providing children with the understanding of what would happen on the day of the funeral, endeavouring to make it less frightening. It was reported these advanced

preparations were helpful to manage any worries or concerns children had, as it provided them the opportunity to ask questions regarding the funeral venue or structure to the bereaved parent or funeral director.

*“just like any inquisitive child, she came and it was ‘what’s this’ and ‘what’s that used for’. and to the best of my ability I was able to explain that all to her. but it was more about normalising the funeral home, and preparing her for what was to come” [funeral director interview 10]*

It appeared that some funeral directors were focused on coordinating the practicalities surrounding the day of the funeral. Other funeral directors highlighted experiences of reassuring and informing families that children can be meaningfully involved in the delivery of their mum or dad’s funeral. This has included children being involved during hand-shakes or hugs to gain comfort from the family and friends who came to express support and sympathy at the funeral, and giving offertory religious gifts or symbols during the service. Other examples provided specifically for young children included placing their hand on the coffin as it was being carried, and throwing a flower into the grave. Other suggestions offered by funeral directors surrounding how teenagers could be involved in delivery of the funeral included giving personal readings or poems as a tribute to the parent during the funeral service.

*“you know I had plenty of cases where the family would say what do we do with the kids on the day. and I would say ask them if they want to be involved. you know maybe the ‘wee-ones’ might like to take a flower out of the spray and throw it into the grave” [funeral director interview 19]*

Funeral directors reported attendance at funerals vary as a result of factors such as how well the individual was known, or the size of the family. However, funeral directors often identified funerals of younger parents as largely attended. Some funeral directors suggested it to be good practice to nominate an adult such as an aunt, uncle or close friend to each individual young child

in the family on the day of the funeral. This was suggested as a means of reassurance to the bereaved parent that their young children would be looked after, particularly in cases of distress or where the children may be separated from the parent.

*“I’d usually advise the family to have a plan B. you know if the child got upset during the service then aunty Joan can take them out as opposed to the whole family having to go. or say the child didn’t want to go to the grave” [funeral director interview 21]*

### ***Societal shifts influencing the immediate bereavement period when a parent dies from cancer***

As generations have evolved, many funeral directors identified societal shifts as influencing families approach to the immediate bereavement period. This has included an increase in children attending the funeral. Although still predominately traditional within church and religious environments, funeral directors have witnessed a greater openness for more bespoke requirements for younger families in Northern Ireland. This has included neutral venues for funeral services, such as sports clubs and community centres and cremation rather than burial. Also, humanist-led services as a result of less connection to traditional church religion amongst the younger generation.

*“I’m certainly mindful that times are changing and so are people’s expectations. you can’t just assume the funeral is going to be in the local chapel. I mean the last funeral that I conducted of a young parent was held in the local football club.” [funeral director interview 07]*

Funeral directors reported that society as a whole appeared to be increasingly regarding the funeral as a celebration of the person’s life to achieve an uplifting experience. Funeral directors stated that families, especially when the person who has died is younger, are more inclined to personalise the funeral according to traits and values of the person who died. Examples reported included wearing jerseys of the deceased’s favourite sporting team, or having the coffin sprayed in their favourite colour or wrapped in photographs.

*“younger families realise they don’t have to go humdrum and it can be a celebration of life and not this depressing dirge. they are more open to newer ideas and ways of thinking.” [funeral director interview 17]*

## **Discussion**

Findings highlighted funeral directors’ perceptions of the challenges experienced by many families in the immediate bereavement period, when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer. Identified challenges included: a bereaved parent’s struggle to tell the children their mum or dad has died, a family’s uncertainty towards including the children in the planning and delivery of the funeral, and preparing children to view their parent in the coffin.

The care and support provided to young families in the immediate bereavement period by funeral directors varied. Some funeral directors described their role as focused on coordinating the logistics of a funeral. It is possible some of the funeral directors in this study did not want to engage in emotive conversations with bereaved parents concerning their dependent children so soon after the death for a fear of causing further distress to the parent’s grief (Hayslip et al., 2007). Transference of the emotion and pain experienced by the young newly bereaved family is perhaps why some funeral directors felt unable to provide meaningful support to families in the immediate bereavement period. Other explanations may include: a lack of clear guidelines and training for funeral directors on how to provide care and support to families in the immediate bereavement period, or perceptions the needs of families following the death of a parent are addressed by other professionals such as clergy members (Fowler, 2004; French, 1985). Involvement of children in the immediate bereavement period is a relatively new concept in Western cultures, therefore it is possible that some funeral directors were unaware of the challenges faced by newly bereaved parents (Doka, 2000; Dyregrov & Kristensen, 2020). Also, some funeral directors may have been motivated by profit, rather than providing a pastoral role to families in the immediate bereavement period when a parent of dependent children has died (Bailey, 2010; Bradbury, 1999; Howarth, 1996).

Other funeral directors felt helping families navigate the immediate bereavement period with the children was an instrumental aspect of their role. This finding has been reported in a study

of funeral directors by Mahon (2009). Usually, this was a result of funeral directors desire to help parents navigate a painful experience with their children, and alleviate part of the suffering experienced by the newly bereaved family. However, it also appeared the depth of care and support provided by a funeral director was impacted by their (the individual funeral director) desire to promote company reputation and remain competitive in the funeral directing industry. It may be argued that individuals now ‘shop around’ when choosing the service of a funeral director, rather than selecting the service most convenient to them (Parsons, 2003; Woodthorpe, 2017; Woodthorpe & Rumble, 2016). Funeral directors stated many young bereaved families have little experience of organising (or even attending) a funeral. Thus, families are unable to choose the service of a funeral director based on previous satisfactory experience (Hopwood, 1996; Parsons, 2003), but decisions based on reported customer satisfaction of others, centered on their ‘good reputation’. Furthermore, although funeral directors provide a needed service in a Western culture such as Northern Ireland (Howarth, 1996), custom is not guaranteed in a competitive and growing market (Parsons & Parsons, 2018; van der Laan & Moerman, 2017). This may allude to a funeral director’s desire to ‘go that extra mile’ when caring for bereaved families in the immediate bereavement period, when a parent of dependent children has died.

Funeral directors can have an instrumental role in providing care and support for a family during the immediate bereavement period, specifically in relation to dependent children. This includes: encouraging a family that children can be meaningfully involved in the preparations and throughout the funeral period, reassuring a family that children can view their mum or dad in the coffin, and providing a bereaved parent with clear language as they prepare the children for these events. If this pastoral care were incorporated as part of the funeral directing role, it could empower a bereaved parent’s provision of supporting their children in the immediate bereavement period, which could help mediate negative coping into adulthood (Christ, 2000; Fristad et al., 2000; Holland, 2004; Søjting et al., 2016; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Weller et al., 1991; Worden, 1996). Further research is needed from bereaved parents and children to have a better understanding of their needs during the immediate bereavement period, as funeral directors’ perceptions of familial challenges during this period bore from personal experience alone, rather than evidence-based guidelines or educational intervention.



Funeral directors highlighted many bereaved parents' struggled in sharing the distressing news with the children that their parent had died. Other literature has reported parents often require guidance on how to communicate the death of a parent to dependent children (Sheehan et al., 2019). It could be helpful if the well-parent is equipped with appropriate language on how to explain death to children before the event occurs. Acquiring such knowledge may help them explain death to their children when the parent has died.

It was perceived that advanced planning of the funeral aided family functioning when the parent had died. Other literature has reported that knowledge of a loved one's wishes facilitated ease for the family, when making funeral arrangements after the death occurred (Rugg & Jones, 2019). Both parents should be encouraged to take opportunities as soon as possible, to discuss wishes and plans for the future when the ill-parent receives a poor cancer prognosis. Previous studies have suggested that it may be helpful for parents to involve their children in these conversations, as a child's inclusion in the decision making can help promote positive coping and adjustment into their adulthood (Christ, 2000; Silverman & Worden, 1992; Worden, 1996). Health and social care professionals are well-placed to engage in facilitative family-centred communication when a parent is dying from cancer (Hanna et al., in press).

As parents or grandparents themselves, funeral directors reported working alongside families when a parent of dependent children has died as emotionally challenging. Other literature has reported a funeral director often find it overwhelming in working with families whose family set-up is similar to the funeral director's (Forsyth et al., 2006). To support funeral directors in their provision of caring for and supporting families in the immediate bereavement period, opportunities should be available for them to offload occupational stress from exposure to emotionally charged situations (Bailey, 2019).

### ***Strengths and limitations of the study***

Despite a varied sample of funeral directors from private and public limited companies across rural and urban communities, 15 funeral directors rejected the invitation to participate in the research. Although funeral directors unpredictability of 'free-time' to be involved was often a

factor in participating, many funeral directors stated they could not contribute to the research as they had a lack of experience in providing support to young families beyond the logistics of coordinating a funeral. Given that experiencing the death of a parent as a dependent child is not an unusual experience (Parsons, 2011), there appears to be a gap between helping young families navigate the immediate bereavement period with their children, and the provision of care and support provided from the funeral director.

The current study limited funeral directors' experiences of being involved with families when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer. Other illnesses such as coronary heart disease or AIDS may have different challenges and support needs for young families, to which future research should investigate. Similarly, when a parent has died suddenly or in traumatic events such as suicide and road accidents.

This study is Irish focused where strong 'death rituals' still exist, but are ideal to learn from as the same ritualistic processes apply. However, funeral directors were recruited from a nation less ethnically and culturally diverse (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2014) and where families usually employ a funeral director. Future research should explore how bereaved families navigate the immediate bereavement period experience in other contexts, such as in Islamic or Hindu cultures where rituals and a child's involvement are different (Brown & Dominica, 2012; Gatrad & Sheikh, 2002) and families do not have the same availability of a funeral director.

## Conclusion

Through the lens of the funeral director, this research has highlighted the distressing situation and challenges experienced by many young families in the immediate bereavement period, when a parent of dependent children has died from cancer. [Funeral directors can have an important role in supporting newly bereaved families navigate this unfamiliar experience. In particular, equipping bereaved parents with the tools necessary to guide dependent children through stages of the immediate bereavement period. This includes planning of the funeral, preparing to view the parent in the coffin, attending and taking part in the funeral.](#)

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