

Returning personal effects in a bin liner must stop, says researcher

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The personal effects of the victims of disasters and terrorist attacks are sometimes returned to relatives in bin liners or withheld for spurious health and safety reasons, says a researcher speaking at the Death, dying & disposal conference organised by the University of Bath today.

To help relatives cope with their grief, more thought needs to be put into how personal belongings, such as mobile phones, wallets and items of clothing, are returned to the bereaved.

Lucy Payne, a Senior Lecturer from the Civil Emergency Management Centre at the University of Hertfordshire, is working on a project with the metropolitan police, coroner's offices and charities to try and improve the way personal property is returned to the bereaved.

As well as providing special containers, she is convinced that better communication between the authorities and relatives can help improve both the therapeutic and practical issues for the return of belongings.

“Simple everyday belongings can be of great emotional and personal value to the bereaved,” said Lucy.

“Returning their loved one's possessions in a bin liner, or refusing to return them at all, can be psychologically harmful to the bereaved.

“Sometimes possessions have to be retained for evidence, but this is not always explained to relatives.

“On other occasions these belongings are retained because specks of blood or fuel are seen as a health and safety threat.

“Relatives should also always be consulted about whether items are cleaned and repaired before they are returned as that should be an individual’s choice.

“If you launder an item of clothing before asking, you can never get it back to the original position.”

The project aims to provide best practice guidance for practitioners to help improve the way possessions are returned.

Source: University of Bath

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