

We work with the dead...but we look after the living too

Working in a hospital mortuary? OK, it's not everyone's idea of a dream job. But actually it's far more rewarding than meets the eye. EMMA PALMER takes a closer look at the very dedicated mortuary and bereavement team at Basildon Hospital.

It's the section of a hospital none of us really wants to think about, let alone visit. But, nevertheless, it exists and the people who work there take pride in carrying out their duties with unfailing sensitivity and compassion.

The mortuary department at Basildon Hospital also serves the community of south-west Essex, which accounts for about two thirds of its staff members' work.

The area consists of a post-mortem room, a fridge room, a viewing room for families and a contingency room to be used in the event of disasters. There is also a designated entrance and exit for undertakers and vehicles.

So what's it actually like to tell people you work in a mortuary?

Lisa Davies, deputy manager of Basildon Hospital's mortuary, says it can be difficult dealing with people's perceptions of her work.

She says: "Sometimes I dread being asked what I do for a living, because most people make the same comments. They have some very odd ideas about the job that are usually based on things they have seen on television.

"In fact, this is a very caring job, and you have to be a people person. I find it very satisfying meeting families who come to view their loved ones. You want to do everything possible to support them at a difficult time."

Lisa is part of a team of four, led by manager David Mallott. There's also Louise Rice, senior anatomical pathology technician, and Jake Smith, trainee anatomical pathology technician.

The mortuary is kept spotless

by the team, who maintain documentation thoroughly to make sure it conforms to the very strict regulations of three different inspectorates.

They also work with pathologists carrying out post mortems to determine the cause of death of a person. These may be ordered by the coroner if the cause of death is not clear.

So under what circumstances do post mortems take place?

There are a number of reasons why a death must be referred to the coroner, for example, if the cause of death is not clear, or if the person died during an operation or while under anaesthetic.

The coroner may then decide a post mortem is necessary. This will delay the registration of the death and the funeral arrangements. If the cause of death is still not clear after the post-mortem, the coroner must hold an inquest, which will delay things further.

Currently, there are five consultant pathologists at the hospital trust, but the coroner may request an independent pathologist if there are any concerns. The mortuary staff also work with the external forensic pathologist to assist the police with post mortems.

In some cases, the hospital may ask the closest relative for permission to conduct a post mortem to gain a better understanding of the cause of death, which could help with future diagnosis and treatment of other patients. The relative is entitled to refuse this request.

Louise says the emotional side of the work can be harder to deal



■ Compassionate role – the mortuary team at Basildon Hospital



Respect, dignity and compassion are essential to the job

with than the physical aspect.

She says: "We do get upset sometimes, particularly seeing families in grief. I find it hard if the deceased is an older person and there is no next of kin taking responsibility for them – everyone should have a nice funeral.

"When I started the job, my first boss said, 'treat the deceased as you would want your relatives to be treated', and I remember that every day."

So what qualities are essential for this type of job?

Lisa says: "Respect, dignity and compassion are absolutely essential to the job. When we are working, we stay quiet and concentrate. With the relatives, you can tell when they just want to view their loved one quickly and go, and when they want to talk. Even if you are busy, you make the time to listen."

WE OFFER A GUIDING HAND FOR FAMILIES IN GRIEF...

UNTIL you have had to deal with the loss of a loved one, there is no reason why you would know the steps that have to be taken in order to organise the funeral. But this means bereaved people may be left feeling bewildered at a time when they are shell-shocked with grief.

The bereavement office at Basildon Hospital is there to support people in this situation and to guide them through the official red tape that has to be followed.

When a patient passes away, ward staff advise the relatives how to make an appointment with the bereavement office.

Dawn Haigh, manager, runs the office with Carole Carter, bereavement officer.

Dawn explained: "We offer support and guidance to relatives – our aim is to make such a difficult time easier.

"There are also five chaplains working with the bereavement office who offer support and information to families, regardless of what, if any religion, they follow.

"They may already have spent time with relatives when their loved ones were on a ward, and so be a familiar friendly face and Macmillan offer bereavement counselling, not

just to those whose loved ones had cancer."

For deaths that have occurred in hospital, the patient's notes are delivered to the bereavement office and Dawn and Carole then find an appropriate doctor to sign the medical certificate of cause of death.

This enables the relatives to register the death. It is crucial this is done promptly and accurately, in order for relatives to proceed with funeral arrangements, so Dawn and Carole check the completed paperwork carefully.

"Our aim is to provide an efficient service, because it is one of the most helpful things you can do for a grieving family," says Dawn.

"It is really important to maintain good communication with the family, so they always know what is happening. It is very satisfying helping people at a difficult time."

Carole agrees, adding why she has stayed in this field of work for so long: "Although it's sad, it is rewarding supporting the families. My mum died at the age of 50 when I was 23 and I remember how I felt. I feel I have found my niche, as I am good at empathising with people."

EDUCATION ROUND-UP

■ **BRIBERY**, it seems, may not be the answer when it comes to getting children to score top marks in their GCSEs.

A new study suggests parents who use financial incentives to encourage their children to do well in their exams may be wasting their money.

However, researchers from

the Universities of Bristol and Chicago – who carried out the research – did find the promise of an outing for doing well at school could help struggling pupils improve, rather than a straight financial reward.

■ **ESSEX** University is hosting an informative open day, so potential students can get a

tour of its Colchester campus, on Saturday, October 25.

Anyone interested in enrolling on a course at the university is advised to book a space at the open day in advance.

Tours of the site on alternative days can also be arranged for those unable to make the event.

Visit essex.ac.uk or email

visit@essex.ac.uk for more details.

■ **THOUSANDS** of teenagers across the UK are to get an extra hour in bed, thanks to a trial to see whether later school start times can boost GCSE results.

University of Oxford researchers say teenagers start

functioning properly two hours later than older adults and therefore would benefit from a lie-in.

A trial tracking nearly 32,000 GCSE pupils in more than 100 schools will assess whether a later school start leads to higher grades, as well as seeing if it has an affect on students' mental health and wellbeing.