More services needed for bereaved children

Zosia Kmietowicz *London*

All children who have experienced the death of a close relative should be able to gain prompt access to expert counselling and support services, concluded specialists at the first national conference on child bereavement.

To meet the demand for help and advice more services and research are urgently needed, as well as better public education on the effects of childhood loss.

Although many services offer bereavement counselling and support to children, the distribution of these services in Britain is patchy, according to Barbara Monroe, director of St Christopher's Candle Project in London, who opened the meeting, held in London and organised by Marie Curie Cancer Care.

With no central coordination, access to what is available

can be a matter of luck, said Ms Monroe, who recounted the case of a mother who spent a year searching for bereavement support for her son. "We must make sure that the offer of basic advice and support is extended to all children and their carers," she said.

No national statistics exist on the numbers of children affected by bereavement, but it is estimated that 2% of children are bereaved before the age of 18. In a secondary school of 800 pupils it is thought that about 24 children have experienced a death in the family.

Research on the effects of bereavement in childhood is scant, and because of the haphazard manner in which services have developed they are often uncoordinated, unpublished,

underfunded, and unmonitored.

The Childhood Bereavement Project, which has been set up with backing from the Diana Fund, is being launched this weekend with the specific aims of coordinating services, setting ethical and practice standards, and providing a central access point to services nationwide.

Bereavement can be isolating and lonely for a child, and the well meaning protection often offered by adults can leave a child bewildered by what is going on, with no opportunity to ask questions, address their worries, or even to cry for fear it will upset others.

"Protecting children can often leave them isolated with their strange and confusing feelings," said Ms Monroe. "Bereavement services cannot make children feel not sad, but they can help them understand and acknowledge their loss." □

The Childhood Bereavement Project can be contacted by telephone on 0115 847 3803.

Twenty countries pledge to wipe out TB

Tony Sheldon *Amsterdam*

Ministers from the 20 countries most burdened by tuberculosis marked world tuberculosis day last week by agreeing a framework for action aimed at "consigning to the history books" a disease that currently claims two million lives a year.

The Amsterdam Declaration was signed at a conference convened by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank, partners in the new Stop Tuberculosis initiative. The initiative aims to increase coverage of the highly effective directly observed treatment, short course (DOTS) programmes from 25% of patients with tuberculosis to 70% in five years.

The countries, representing 80% of the eight million new cases of tuberculosis each year, committed themselves to supporting a global partnership agreement. This will help to finance and support national tuberculosis programmes, especially in countries worst hit but least able to afford to take action. The WHO and the World Bank are to work with governments to implement the agreement, which should begin in the autumn.

The initiative also plans a global fund for tuberculosis and a global drug facility to seek extra financing and ensure the supply, distribution, and monitoring of tuberculosis drugs. The conference heard that "substantial and sustained funding" was needed. The health minister for Thailand, Korn Dabbaransi, hoped that other countries "would be convinced of our true need for financial and manpower resources."

The economic and development importance of investment was emphasised with figures showing that 95% of the 20 million people with tuberculosis lived in the developing world. Three quarters of cases in those areas, moreover, were in the most economically productive age group of 15 to 54 year olds.

Dr Arata Kochi, director of the initiative, said that more funding was being sought. □

Mrs Clinton aims to reduce psychoactive drugs in young children

Fred Charatan *Florida*

Hillary Rodham Clinton met federal health officials, teachers, family doctors, psychiatrists, and drug company executives at the White House recently to consider the rising use of psychoactive

drugs in children aged under 6 years.

She said, "We are not here to bash the use of these medications. They have literally been a godsend for countless adults and young people with behavioural and emotional problems."

But in referring to public concern over the sharp increase in the use of such drugs in children under 6, she added, "Some of these young children have problems that are nothing more than childhood or adolescence."

As part of the White House initiative, the Food and Drug Administration will develop new

drug labels, and the National Institutes of Health will begin a large nationwide study of methylphenidate (Ritalin) use in children under the age of 6.

The White House will hold a conference this autumn on the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness in very young children. Dr Steven Hyman, director of the National Institute of Mental Health, said, "As a rule of thumb, doctors, psychologists, and social workers should attempt to modify the behaviour of a child and deal with family crises before drugs are prescribed."

He said that his institute would spend \$6m (£3.75m) in the next five years to study whether methylphenidate is safe and effective for treating preschool children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, the most commonly diagnosed psychiatric disorder in children.

Laurence Greenhill, professor of clinical psychiatry at Columbia University in New York, said, "Doctors are sometimes too quick to prescribe medications for preschool children. The behaviour of an enthusiastic, ebullient 3 year old with lots of energy can be misinterpreted as attention deficit disorder when it's just a variation of normal behaviour." □

Hillary Rodham Clinton, with Surgeon General David Satcher, announces a campaign to limit the use of psychoactive drugs in children

AP PHOTO/JOE MARQUETTE