

An Introduction to Death and Dying

Sarah Earle, Carol Komaromy and Caroline Batholomew

This book, which brings together a collection of classic and contemporary writing in the field of death and dying, draws on a wide range of disciplines and perspectives. The book is organised into five discrete sections exploring: the meaning of death, caring at the end of life, moral and ethical dilemmas, grief and bereavement, and researching death, dying and bereavement. However, each part of the book, and the contributions within them, also explore overlapping themes and issues.

Part I focuses on the ways in which death can be conceptualised and understood. The readings draw on a range of disciplines to examine the meaning of death, for example, the first reading takes a psychological approach to explore the way in which children make sense of death. Other readings in Part I use sociological perspectives to examine how the dead body can become a source of meaning and what that meaning might be. For example, one reading examines the role of the body in the management of the boundary between life and death while another reflects on the body as a site of power and resistance. Other readings explore the meaning of death from a spiritual perspective or from the perspective of diverse religious traditions. The final reading in Part I uses a combined epidemiological and demographic approach to explore changes in death over time and reflects on how a global perspective can enrich understandings of the meaning of death.

In Part II attention turns to the issue of caring at the end of life and focuses on the roles of individuals, organisations and systems – and the relationships between them. The first pair of readings examine care at the end of life within a global context, exploring issues of social deprivation and public health. The next contribution – drawing on an ethnographic study of dying and death in care homes for older people – considers how the period of dying is defined and the impact of this diagnosis on end-of-life care. The remaining readings in this part of the book discuss the role of professional caregivers, such as social workers and, focusing specifically on the management of emotions, on the role of midwives at the end of life. These readings also consider the role of families and other informal caregivers and the relationships between these and formal caregivers.

Making sense of moral and ethical dilemmas is also vital to developing an understanding of death and dying in practice. Part III begins by exploring moral theory and considers the question: ‘what is ethics?’ The remaining selection of readings examine a range of moral and ethical issues such as the role of the family in patient care and – focusing specifically on children – the principle of respect for autonomy. Consideration is also given to sociological approaches to moral and ethical decision making in two readings which focus on withdrawal of treatment in intensive care, and brain death. The final contribution to Part III examines the doctrine of double effect, and concludes with a discussion on euthanasia.

In Part IV the focus is on grief, bereavement and post-death ritual. This part begins with a brief critical overview of theories of grief, before moving on to explore the subject of

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disposal and the modern practice of cremation. The next selection of readings focus specifically on bereavement. Here, attention is given to the experiences of grandparents and children and one reading focuses specifically on the facilitation of bereavement for survivors of genocide. Moving on from the subject of bereavement, the final contributions in Part IV explore the issue of memorialisation. The growing global phenomenon of roadside memorialisation and the increasingly popular practice of online memorialisation are explored.

There is a growing body of research on and about death, dying and bereavement. The final part of this book explores some of the issues which arise when carrying out research in this field and contributions challenge some of the assumptions that underpin the possible dangers inherent in conducting research at the end of life and with bereaved people. The readings explore whether death, dying and bereavement are taboo and the implications for research with dying people perceived as vulnerable. Some readings examine the role and emotional needs of the researcher, as well as those who are the subjects of research. Drawing on empirical research, other contributions explore the experiences of young people living with HIV, researching people with intellectual disabilities and the subject of reproductive loss. The final reading in this part of the book focuses on the relevance of practice for research and the role of research in practice at the end of life.

The collection of readings in this book – some of which have been especially commissioned for this volume – is not exhaustive and, of course, there are many other interesting and relevant readings which we, as editors, would have liked to include had there been more space. Although the purpose of this book is not to provide a comprehensive digest of the literature in the field, it is intended to be thought-provoking, encouraging critical thinking on the subject of death and dying; we hope you enjoy reading it.