



ON THE DEATH OF A CHILD

Celia Hindmarch

Radcliffe Medical Press, Oxford (1993)

133 pages. Price £12.50

Childhood death is a special loss. It devastates the immediate family and also affects everyone involved with the child: friends, neighbours, medical and nursing staff, teachers, police and clergy. For all of us who feel inadequate when faced with the task of supporting bereaved parents, Celia Hindmarch's book provides a helpful source of practical wisdom.

The author draws on her extensive experience as a counsellor at the Alder Centre bereavement support project. She begins by acknowledging just how difficult it is for professionals to know what to say. Her advice is to grasp the nettle, visit the bereaved family and say little but be prepared to listen. This may sound simple but accepting the burden of grief, guilt and anger is far from easy. Trained bereavement counsellors always have support and supervision. Such provision is woefully lacking for most general practitioners and nursing staff. A useful checklist of resources is included for readers to gain insight into their own sources of support.

Few rules are stated other than a ban on saying to parents 'I know how you feel'. There are, however, useful guidelines which can help in the individual situation. The chapter on grief theory is straightforward and, like the rest of this excellent book, closely related to case study and practical problems. The suggestion for further reading include a thoughtful selection of the key works in this area.

General practitioners, whether experienced or trainees, should not miss the chance of reading this slim volume. It gives the professional a clear idea of how to support and stay with a grieving family. Reviewing *On the death of a child* has been a privilege.

DAVID JEFFREY

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BREAKING BAD NEWS (video and book)

Robin Hull

Warwickshire Police Television Unit, Warwick (1993)

Running time 13 mins. 10 pages. Price £70.00

Doctors' own difficulties with breaking bad news can make a terrible situation even worse. Many general practitioners will remember learning on the job as house officers, and feeling embarrassed and inadequate. This book and video on how to break bad news set out to be thought-provoking rather than instructive, and are intended to be used as the basis for group discussion.

The video reconstructs three scenarios in which relatives are informed of a sudden death by a priest, the police and a junior doctor, respectively. Each scene lasts less than five minutes and ends almost as soon as the news has been broken. Some of it is excruciating to watch, and I am not sure whether any of it was meant to set a good example.

The book deals with each of the three scenarios in turn and poses questions about the appropriateness of the messenger, timing and setting. We are invited to analyse the use of verbal and non-verbal communication and the reactions of all concerned. Showing the whole of each encounter would have been helpful, as ending such an interview can also be difficult. However, the importance of arranging follow up is emphasized.

The three scenarios feature sudden death, perhaps because this is a police video. General practitioners have to deliver many other types of bad news, but the principles, which are summarized at the end, still apply. This is excellent teaching material, in that the viewer does most of the work.

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ASPECTS OF AGING: a celebration of the European year of older people and solidarity between generations 1993

Peter Kaim-Caudle, Jane Keithley and Audrey Mullender (eds)

Whiting and Birch, London (1993)

184 pages. Price £12.95

This book of fewer than 200 pages is a compilation of 14 essays which range from the demography of the ageing population in Europe to the Buddhist approach to dying. Along the way there are interesting contributions, mainly from sociologists, examining the life of older people in different parts of Europe, their economic and political role and status. Margot Jeffreys is the only author who directly addresses a medical topic, 'Is there a need for geriatric medicine?' She briefly summarizes the arguments for and against a distinct specialty of geriatric medicine without reaching a definite conclusion. Other contributors are more discursive in their approach to their areas of interest. Chris Phillipson challenges the comfortable myths and stereotypes we and our governments hold about old age and about the solidarity between generations referred to in the title of the book. In the 1990s in western Europe, kinship of itself does not determine care provision. In the United Kingdom, care in the community is built on the premise that frail and dependent elderly people wish to remain in their own homes supported by their relatives. It is certainly the case that six million family carers continue to provide the bulk of care in the community in the UK. Moral imperatives concerning filial duties and obligations are giving way to care giving on the basis of a continuing relationship between family members.