



## 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.

MELANIE WYNNE-JONES  
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## ASPECTS OF AGING: a celebration of the European year of older people and solidarity between generations 1993

Peter Kain-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.

In the final chapter, Peter Kaim-Caudle speculates on the future for older people in western Europe. Except for Germany, the growth in the population of older people has passed its peak. Economic support for older people will in future depend less on the longevity of the population and more on patterns of fertility. The recently published *Social trends* indicates that many women are delaying having a first child until in their late 20s so as to be economically secure. Overall fertility in the UK remains at its 1990 level (this is one eighth below replacement level). This spacing of the generations, if it continues, means that the burden of care of an ageing population is likely to be most severe in the 30 years between 2020 and 2050. However, the economic burden of supporting the elderly population by people of working age is dependent on factors in addition to single demographic features. The level of pensions, unemployment rates and the productivity of those in employment have a major impact on the services and care which older people can expect. These economic social issues may seem a long way from general practice but they will surely shape the way in which health care for older people can and will be provided in the 21st century.

GRAHAM BUCKLEY

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#### ABC OF CHILD ABUSE (second edition)

Roy Meadow (ed)  
BMJ Publications, London (1993)  
75 pages. Price £12.95

This second edition of the *ABC of child abuse* gives a much better first impression as it has a new cover. A textbook about child abuse which declared on the front cover of its first edition that 'child abuse is the difference between a hand on the bottom and a fist in the face' had always seemed a contradiction in terms, with the implication that a hand on the bottom is alright. This indicates a gradual change in attitude from that in the 1960s when such a statement might have been so, but in the 1990s there is increasing concern about the place of corporal punishment.

This book is considerably larger than the first edition and includes new information about the sensitivity and specificity of diagnostic signs; new chapters on ophthalmological presentations and on the role of social services; new information relating to the role of child psychiatry and the function of case conferences to reflect current practice and the implications of the children act 1989; and the effect of new legislation, and the role of health professionals in preparing reports and presenting evidence in courts.

With all the changes in the children act the discussion on legal aspects was particularly apposite. It is disappointing that the second edition has not been used to make reference to the advantages (and disadvantages) of the children's panel system in Scotland. It would have been useful to contrast the two systems functioning in the United Kingdom. The suggestions on preparing legal reports were especially helpful, both generally and for reports relating to child abuse.

The chapter on sexual abuse was let down by the lack of reference to current research, in that the definition starting the chapter stated that it included any use of children for the sexual gratification of adults. This is sadly out of date as it is well recognized that children are abused by other children and teenagers as well as by adults. The references to careful examining of the mouth for signs of injury as a result of oral sex

is a good reminder. The general discussion relating to various aspects of sexual abuse is practical and appropriate to primary health care.

The book is well written and easy to read. In order to remember what one has read, there are excellent tables and illustrations. In spite of a few criticisms, it is a book that should be in every practice library and, more importantly, be read by all of the primary care team. The last chapter relating abuse in childhood to problems for the adult survivor is particularly pertinent.

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## MRCGP EXAMINATION – 1994/5

The dates and venues of the next two examinations for Membership are as follows:

### October/December 1994

Written papers:

Tuesday 25 October 1994 at centres in London, Manchester, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Cardiff, Belfast, Dublin, Liverpool, Ripon, Birmingham, Bristol, Sennelager and Riyadh.

Oral Examinations:

In Edinburgh on Monday 5 and Tuesday 6 December and in London from Wednesday 7 to Monday 12 December inclusive.

The closing date for the receipt of applications is Friday 2 September 1994.

### May/July 1995

Written papers:

Wednesday 3 May 1995 at those centres listed above.

Oral Examinations:

In Edinburgh from Monday 19 to Wednesday 21 June inclusive and in London from Thursday 22 June to Saturday 1 July inclusive.

The closing date for the receipt of applications is Friday 24 February 1995.

MRCGP is an additional registrable qualification and provides evidence of competence in child health surveillance for accreditation.

For further information and an application form please write to The Examination Department, Royal College of General Practitioners, 14 Princes Gate, Hyde Park, London SW7 1PU, or telephone: 071-581 3232.