Matters of Life and Death

KEY WRITINGS

IONA HEATH

with a contribution from John Berger
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Preface

I am indebted to many people but above all to those many patients who, over the last 30 years, have taught me about different ways of living and dying and, as a result, almost everything I know about what it is to be a general practitioner.

The greatest single debt is to John Berger in both the example and inspiration of his writing and the generosity and encouragement of his letters. Much of this book arose out of the ideas and thinking that we have exchanged over several years. Very gently, he has encouraged me to search more deeply and has unfailingly provided the cues to help me think things through.

Many colleagues and friends have also helped – either through conversation or their own writing or by commenting on earlier drafts of the whole or parts of this text. Here I must mention Björn Nilsson, Per Fugelli, both Charlotte Holsts, Carl Edvard Rudebeck, Anna Donald, John Nessa, Regin Hjertholm and James Willis but there are many others.

In June 2003, I had the enormous good fortune to be invited to participate in a five-day seminar organised by Edvin Schei and the Filosofisk Poliklinikk of the University of Bergen. The seminar was held at the magnificent Rosendal estate in Norway and it was here that I was first able to try out my ideas with wise colleagues. I was immensely encouraged and helped by their response.

Finally, I thank my family – Daisy, Eric and most of all David – for their patience, their tolerance of the time it has all taken and their consistent belief that I have something to say.

Iona Heath

September 2007
About the Authors

Iona Heath has been working as an inner city general practitioner at the Caversham Group Practice in Kentish Town in the London Borough of Camden since 1975.

In 1989, she stood in the national ballot for the Council of the Royal College of General Practitioners to protest about the threat to suspend GP training in the North East Thames Region. She has been a member of College Council since then and chaired the Health Inequalities Standing Group from 1997 to 2003 and the Committee on Medical Ethics from 1998 to 2004. She is the current chairman of the College’s International Committee and the Ethics Committee of the British Medical Journal. From 1997 to 1999, she was a member of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care for the Elderly and she was a member of the Human Genetics Commission from 2004 to 2007.

John Berger is a storyteller, essayist, novelist, screenwriter, dramatist and critic. He is one of the most internationally influential writers of the last 50 years, who has explored the relationships between the individual and society, culture and politics and experience and expression in a series of novels, essays, plays, films, photographic collaborations and performances, unmatched in their diversity, ambition and reach. In 1967, together with the photographer Jean Mohr, he published A Fortunate Man: the story of a country doctor which is widely regarded as quite simply the most extraordinary book ever written about general practice.
A Story

John Berger
A Story

F was 95 and, although when he walked he was as bent as a half-closed jack-knife, he still cooked his own meals, read the newspaper and followed what is happening in the Middle East. Since the death of his wife, no woman had lived in the farmhouse. His sons, who did, had enlarged the herd of milking cows from three (when they were at school) to well over 100 today. As F grew older his sons, who believed in work, accepted him as he was, and did not try to change him. He was a man who thought and prayed and did not work a lot. By temperament an anarchist. Both deferential and obstinate. Recently the sons rebuilt the entire house, but they left his room, next to the kitchen, untouched so that he could still take exactly the same steps, pursuing his routine of cutting up vegetables for his soup, praying, lighting his pipe and trying to answer his own questions.

The Tuesday before last F died. In the evening just before the milking began the sons discovered him on the floor by his bed, finding it hard to breathe. They phoned everywhere they could. Only the local firemen responded. Around 10 pm F was driven off by the firemen to the hospital in the nearest town where he died at 5 am. He spent the last few hours of his long life, precipitously removed from his home, with sparse medical attention. Under the circumstances, for which nobody involved was to blame, he died arbitrarily separated from all that body of human experience, learnt over centuries, concerning the task of being with, and accompanying, the dying.

When he was young there were few doctors in this alpine region and people were accustomed to coping with illness (and dying) amongst themselves. By the time the sons were born there was a national medical service; doctors answered calls in the middle of the night and came to the house, hospitals were enlarged. The villagers gradually became dependent upon a professional medical practice and took few decisions themselves. Ten
years ago with privatisation and deregulation, things changed again. Today medical care in an emergency has been reduced to a service of enforced transport. F died nowhere.
Ways of Dying

Iona Heath
Ways of Dying

Society, art, culture, the whole of human civilization is nothing but evasion, one great collective self-delusion, the intention of which is to make us forget that all the time we are falling through the air, at every moment getting closer to death.

Sven Lindqvist¹
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1 INTRODUCTION

I write to find my way. My signposts are words – those of my patients and my friends, and those of writers whose extraordinary talents teach us how words work and about their capacity to hold and communicate meaning and to make us feel less alone. My method is defended by Walter Benjamin:

Learning was a form of collecting, as in the quotations and excerpts from daily reading which Benjamin accumulated in notebooks that he carried everywhere and from which he would read aloud to his friends. Thinking was also a form of collecting, at least in its preliminary stages. He conscientiously logged stray ideas; developed mini-ideas in letters to friends.²

More recently, complexity theory lends support with the notion that new meaning emerges from chaos.³

The great 19th century Russian radical Alexander Herzen included within his autobiography a chapter rather cumbersomely entitled ‘A relevant chrestomathy from the later years’.⁴ This strange word combines the Greek words for useful and learning and it is used to describe a collection of short quotations, especially one that is compiled to help in the learning of a language. In a sense, what follows is my personal annotated chrestomathy for a language of dying which makes sense in the context of my work as a general practitioner over many years. It describes a journey within which the words of poets, writers and thinkers illuminate the struggles of ordinary people and the details of lives and deaths which are always in some measure extraordinary.

Fifty-six million people die each year. Even if each death affects only five other people, the total number affected each year approaches 300 million or 5% of the world’s population.⁵ Dying permeates living, and yet much of the public response to death and dying remains polarised between sensationalism and silence.
NOTES AND REFERENCES