Book review

Death, dying and bereavement

Edited by Donna Dickerson, Malcolm Johnson and Jeanne Samson Katz.
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Books on death and bereavement do not generally make lively bedside reading. The book “Death, Dying and Bereavement” does.

“Death, Dying and Bereavement” is a superb collection of articles, contributed by doctors, nurses, social workers and ordinary persons on the medical, anthropological and social aspects of death, interspersed with literary excerpts and first-hand accounts on the themes of the book.

The book is divided into four parts: the first part deals with the various concepts of death in different religions and sectors of society, parts two and three discuss palliative care and end of life issues, including euthanasia. The last section deals with those that are left behind, the bereaved, and who are intimately linked to the phenomenon of death.

In spite of the wide variety of articles, each part constitutes a coherent collection, which in its turn integrates into the whole book. Although each account can be read separately, it is strongly recommended to read the various chapters in the order in which they are presented. It is the best way to get right the messages this book tries to pass.

The main achievement of the book is the reintegration of the act of dying into the world of the living, firstly by providing a different perception of death and secondly, as a result of that perception, a different health care approach to the dying person.

As from the second half of the 20th century, death has been progressively dissociated from the process of life, through the abandonment of rituals and customs surrounding the dying and dead person. Scientific and technological progress has pushed, and still is pushing forward the moment of death. Death is constantly fought against, and very often hidden and ignored.

The first part of the book imperceptibly conditions the reader to a humanistic understanding of the phenomenon of death. The numerous accounts of rites and rituals surrounding death in Moslem, Hindu, Sikh and Jewish communities as well as dying practices in Eur-
not only the dying but also those who suffer grief through the demise of a relative or friend. Death is no longer a cold clinical event, but a social phenomenon which extends time-wise beyond the act of death itself. Some of the accounts testify to the distress that can be caused by bad counselling by health professionals, not to mention the distress suffered by health professionals themselves when dealing with dying persons. The numerous accounts of personal experiences show that each dying person is a unique individual, with his or her own specific problems. Health care of the dying does not boil down to a set of clinical procedures. It is a dialogue between the patient, the relatives and friends and all the health professionals involved in the case.

This book is obviously invaluable for practitioners who need to know not only the rules and procedures but also the realities of life. It also makes fascinating reading for the ordinary layman, particularly in a society that tries to ignore the inevitable end: death.

Henry Scicluna