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What is This?
The good death

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In my experience, there has been a good deal of positive attention to death and dying recently. This contributes to the raising of awareness of philosophical, practical and aesthetic aspects. The Wellcome Collection in London, for example, hosted a special weekend event on the theme of ‘What makes a good death?’ The weekend event coincided with a special exhibition of death-related art and artefacts collected by Richard Harris.

A very positive feature of the event was the range of different disciplinary perspectives brought to bear on ‘a good death’. Kate Forde, Senior Curator, provided an overview of the Richard Harris Collection and discussed features of the exhibition, such as the dance of death, contemplation of death, commemoration, violent death and Eros and Thanatos. The Latin phrase ‘momento mori’ (remember you will die) was an unavoidable theme of the exhibition. Other speakers examined historical, philosophical and aesthetic dimensions of death. Sheila Payne, Director of the International Observatory on End of Life Care at Lancaster University, examined the changing status of the dying person over time and the evolution of the hospice movement. Christopher Belshaw, from the Open University, offered a philosophical perspective on the good death, beginning with the death of Socrates and exploring the death and perspectives of Hume, Wittgenstein, Kant and Nietzsche. He made a distinction between two kinds of ‘good death’ – one relating to pleasure and happiness and the other relating to morality (a morally good death).

Sophie Bostock, Assistant Curator at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, provided an engaging overview of ‘ars moriendi’ (the art of dying) through the etchings of 17th-century Romeyn de Hooghe. Desmond Biddulph, a physician and psychotherapist, detailed the Buddhist approach to life and death. Linda Woodhead, Professor of Religion and Society, described some of the changing rituals relating to death. She highlighted differences between the Christian ‘long death’ and the secular ‘short death’ and also current trends such as funeral cakes and tattoos created from the ashes of a dead person. A range of perspectives were presented, then, from the macabre to the curious to the profound.

More locally, we organised a symposium on ‘assisted dying’ with speakers examining philosophical, legal and practice perspectives. The event brought together students and staff from law, health, psychology and economics and from different healthcare practice contexts. There was discussion of the meaning and role of concepts such as autonomy and dignity in the assisted dying debate and of attitudes to death and dying in our ‘death denying’ society. What was particularly positive was the focus on patient and family experiences, the value of end of life care and the respectful and enquiring spirit of engagement of participants. It is reassuring that academics, students and practitioners with very different perspectives can so readily find common ground with a shared vision for end of life care.

Scholarship and research in healthcare and nursing ethics also make a valuable and, I would add, necessary contribution to our approach to death and dying. The special issue of the journal (19.5), edited...
by Chris Gastmans, showcased some of the most interesting recent work in this area. We look forward to the 14th International Nursing Ethics Conference, hosted by Deakin University, which is also on the theme of ‘Ethical issues at the end of life: practice and policy imperatives in healthcare’. The conference coincides with the publication of this issue of *Nursing Ethics* and brings together international experts in the field to share philosophical and empirical research perspectives. Such events provide opportunities for participants to not only reflect more on the most profound questions of life and death but also consider how we can *do* and *be* better in end of life care contexts. Nurses and other health professionals have much to offer communities in enabling them to overcome fears about death and dying and to have the courage to embrace the thought ‘momento mori’.

**References**

