

# DEALING WITH DEATH & DYING

## Perspectives from Society

Over the last century or so there has been a large change in the way society faces and understands death. On the whole we do not live with it as a daily reality, so we do not think about it, face up to it or allow it to shape the way we live. On the contrary we have become so accustomed to medical and social improvement that we tend to view death as something else that we can – or ought to be able to – control. We invite it in when for whatever reason we have had enough of life, and we fight it at all costs when we perceive it to be making an untimely entrance!

The changes in societal attitudes towards death are captured by two poems written some 300 years apart. The first was written by Thomas Nashe as he lay dying of the plague, and the second, 'Rage Rage against the dying of the light,' was written by Dylan Thomas in response to his father's impending death. Nashe's poem is full of acceptance, and has the recurring stanza 'I am sick, I must die, Lord have mercy', where as Thomas' poem is full of anger and refusal to accept death as seen in the recurring title phrase, rage, rage against the dying of the light.

- What issues surrounding care for the dying have you been confronted with so far in your training?

These issues stem from one of two problems:

- **Fear of death and the unknown**
  - Refusal to talk about it
  - Refusal to prepare people for it outside of palliative care – treatment at all costs
- **Lack of fear of death and the 'unknown'**
  - Pro euthanasia & abortion etc.
  - Misconceptions about the afterlife
  - Misconceptions about the purpose of life

## The Biblical Story of Death

It is important that we have a right understanding of the seriousness of rejecting God – of sin – because if we don't get this straight then we won't be focusing on our patient's real needs.

Rejecting God is serious enough to have brought about death and cursing for all mankind. Yet as we come face to face with suffering in our patients, it is easy to lose this perspective and to focus on easing their temporal and present pain – be it physical or emotional. But is their most important need really to hear soothing words from us?

1. Look at the following passages and discuss among yourselves what the Bible has to say about death.

- Genesis 2:16-17                      Warning of death
- Genesis 3:17-24                      Cause of death
- Genesis 5                                Prevalence & existence of death
- John 5:26-29                          Death is not the end
- Revelation 20:11-15                Judgement
- Acts 17:31                              Judgement certain
- 1 Corinthians 15:50-58              Jesus' victory over death
- Revelation 21:3-5                    No more death

2. What are the implications of the Bible's teaching for the way we treat the dying? Consider the importance of speaking the truth about sin and judgement. How can we set about this:

- In Lectures?
- On Placements?
- With colleagues?
- With Patients?

Dealing with death, the dying and the bereaved is never going to be easy because it is such an emotive topic and because it is not a subject about which we can just sit back and share ignorance or offer empty, comforting words. Unlike so many others, we know that there exists ultimate truth, and that what most people like to think about death, or what gives them comfort as they contemplate their bereavement is actually no comfort at all in the face of biblical truth.

We have looked at the biblical framework for death and we know how closely death is tied up with judgement and the rejection of God. But there is an extent to which we are still left to work out how this knowledge should shape our encounters with death. The next few Bible passages look at how Jesus' encounters with death can provide help and guidance.

### **How Jesus is our Example**

1. Look at the following Bible references; before looking at the pointers below try to work out among yourselves the ways in which Jesus is able to, and does, act as a model for us.

- Hebrews 4:14-16
- Luke 22:42-44
- John 11:32-44
- Luke 7:12-15
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-11.

- Hebrews 4:14-16
  - Able to help because he has experienced suffering & death.
- Luke 22:42-44
  - Own experience shows that facing God's wrath in death is greatly to be feared.
- John 11: 32-44
  - Angered by death – it is unnatural, it isn't good, it is an evil.
  - He loved, he mourned. It is okay to grieve.
- Luke 7:12-15
  - Jesus had compassion in the face of death.
  - He has authority over death (gives widow back her son)
  - But Matthew 16:62 – what good is it to gain life and forfeit soul?
- 2 Corinthians 1:3-11
  - God can deliver from death – now
  - God will deliver from death – eternally
  - Death causes us to rely on God – perspective
  - God gives practical comfort and compassion now in the midst of our experiences.
  - Christ is our comforter

2. What implications does all this have for the way we treat the dying?