Knife to the Heart: the Story of Transplant Surgery

Tony Stark, London, Macmillan, 1996, 252 pages, £16.99.

Organ transplantation has become the treatment of choice for organ failure in a variety of systems but behind the success is a fascinating story of the technical, moral and ethical barriers that were overcome. It is also a story of personalities and a will to continue in the face of failure despite the physical or mental torment that both patients and their medical attendants experienced at times. Throughout its history organ transplantation has raised ethical questions and has often been a catalyst, extending the bounds of what is considered acceptable practice in medical circles.

Knife to the Heart is the story of the development of organ transplant surgery during this century from Alexis Carrel to the controversies raised by the imminent and exciting potential for xenotransplantation. Tony Stark's first book, an impressive debut in print, is linked to Stark's BBC series of the same title. It is an excellent and thoroughly readable account of the development of transplantation as seen through the eyes of a journalist. It captures the excitement of the moment, the rise to superstar status that came to surgeons following success, but also the disappointment of failure and the spirit of resolution to

try again and sometimes inappropriate persistence in the face of failure. Stark also manages to convey the sense of an extending medical science and the doubts that many felt about these controversial new practices. These were genuine ethical concerns that today may seem insignificant but at the time were major barriers to "progress". The book makes much of the development of heart transplantation partly because of the unique place the heart has in our psyche but also because successful heart transplantation was dependent upon a fundamental change in the diagnosis of death. Was brain stem death with a beating heart an appropriate criterion for the diagnosis of death, or was it necessary to wait for heart function to cease? Today transplanters accept brain stem death implicitly but Stark records the mental anguish felt by surgeons, anaesthetists and physicians as they wrestled with this problem.

In producing *Knife to the Heart* Tony Stark has made extensive use of first-hand testimony from many of the key surgeons, physicians, patients, organ donors and their families. This gives us a unique insight into the development of transplantation as seen from a variety of perspectives. For those practising in the field of transplantation the book is essential reading and would be a welcome addition to any personal library. The book has less value for those whose primary interest is in medical ethics. The ethical issues are described by Stark, often based on first-hand quotes from those at the centre of the original debate,

but there is little attempt to explore the ethical background or analyse the ethics in any great depth. Ethicists, suspect, would find little "meat" in the text.

In summary, *Knife to the Heart* is written for the general public but excellent reading for those involved in organ transplantation, giving a balanced account of the history of transplantation and many of the ethical and moral dilemmas raised by it. It is not, and was never intended to be, an in-depth analysis of the ethical questions and thus may not hold special interest for those involved in medical ethics.

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