Book reviews

Euthanasia: The Good Death


This book is number 13 in the series Counterblasts, a series of pamphlets in which writers are offered the opportunity to explain in some detail their opinions and ideas, known to be in opposition to the dominant views of our time. Counterblasts, it is said, are written to surprise, to stir up debate — and to change people's minds. They are not intended to present all sides of any argument; bias is frankly acknowledged.

Ludovic Kennedy's views on euthanasia are well known from his broadcasts and newspaper articles. In this pamphlet he does more than simply reiterate them. He explains how he came to develop his opinion and then explores, point by point, the stance maintained by those who are in agreement with his views and of those who object. He gives an overview of the position of voluntary euthanasia societies worldwide; there are 31 groups in membership with the federation of the 'right to die' societies, belonging to 18 countries. Opinion polls in the UK show that in 1985 seventy-two per cent of the population believed that terminally ill people should be allowed to choose when to die. Thirty-five per cent of British doctors said they would be prepared to practise in a way which assisted the death of those who wished it, if it were to be legalised.

Ludovic Kennedy emphasises that every pro-euthanasia group stresses the importance of the voluntary aspect. It is not other people who are asked to decide, it is the patient, only the patient. Doctors, in their position document, 'pretend' that it is they who are asked to decide when a patient should be allowed to die. Ludovic Kennedy is critical of their arrogance and the distortion of the language used to justify their stand. 'Putting patients away', 'dispatching', 'killing' are emotive words used in their rhetoric. No one suggests that people should be dispatched for the convenience of others.

The author quotes the anti-euthanasia position of the religious bodies, especially of the Roman Catholics, but he has little sympathy for the words of the Pope in 1980, that 'suffering in the last moments of life has a special place in God's saving plan ...'. The view of many famous people in favour of helping people to die with dignity are quoted, people such as doctors, writers, philosophers. Opponents are also cited, people like Dame Cecily Saunders, but Ludovic Kennedy is convinced that such people simply cannot understand that for some patients life has lost all meaning. The 'slippery slope' argument advanced by many is simply based on the lack of understanding that only 'voluntary' termination of such meaningless life is under discussion. The thrust of the ethical argument in favour of euthanasia is based on the principle of autonomy. The examples of practice in Holland and the account of personal suffering of people lend weight to the perspective which the writer adopts.

ANNIE T ALTSCHUL
Emeritus Professor of Nursing Studies,
University of Edinburgh
24 Bruntsfield Gardens,
Edinburgh EH10 4EA.

Prenatal Diagnosis: Confronting the Ethical Issues


This book, aimed at a wide range of professionals including those involved in health care, the clergy, lawyers and philosophers, purports to undertake a discursive consideration of the principal moral issues involved in prenatal diagnosis. However, those who read it in the hope that it will assist them in elucidating the complex ethical dilemmas associated with prenatal diagnosis will be disappointed, for in reality it is little more than thinly-veiled anti-abortion propaganda.

The first part of the book deals primarily with facts, yet even these, while largely correct, are not presented dispassionately. Throughout the supposedly factual description of the various procedures by which, and disorders for which, prenatal diagnosis can be made, the reader is encouraged to condemn the very concept of diagnosing abnormalities in the unborn child. Thus, one is constantly reminded that prenatal diagnosis is performed most frequently with a view to 'elimination of defective fetuses', that it has a primarily 'destructive aim', and that it 'constitutes a way of identifying children thought to be socially undesirable'.

This theme is expanded in the section of the book, entitled 'The ethical dimension'. In considering the attitudes of the Church towards prenatal diagnosis, the author describes almost exclusively the views of the Catholic Church, with historical references to various papal statements on abortion. There is little, if any, mention of dissonance amongst non-conformist Catholics, and no mention of the views expressed by leaders of other denominations or religions.

There is really only one section of the book that could be accepted as an examination of the moral issues surrounding prenatal diagnosis, namely, the chapter entitled 'Arguments for abortion of abnormal fetuses and the moral status of the developing embryo'. However, even
this section is so subjective that the arguments supporting prenatal diagnosis and selective termination of affected pregnancies are merely posed, then immediately dismissed. Any discussion is so biased as hardly to merit being described as such; rather, the book constitutes a constant and unashamed diatribe against the use of prenatal diagnosis in any form other than as a therapeutic means of identifying treatable disorders.

It is unfortunate that the book is published at a time when the abortion laws in this country are undergoing radical, liberal revision, since a discussion of the imminent changes to the 1967 Act has not been included. Indeed, the author's early remark that 'it is ... quite possible that before the end of this century we shall see many of the more liberal laws (concerning abortion) repealed or amended restrictively' is, in retrospect, rather far from the truth. One might be forgiven for construing it as wishful thinking.

VIRGINIA N BOLTON
Senior Embryologist/Honorary Lecturer,
Assisted Conception Unit,
Department of Obstetrics and
Gynaecology, King's College School of
Medicine and Dentistry,
University of London.

Loss and Bereavement

Bridget Cook and Shelagh G Phillips,
90 pages, London, £6.50, Austen
Cornish Publishers Limited in
association with The Lisa Sainsbury

It is understandable that a journal of medical ethics should select for review, publications with an obvious focus on ethical issues. Although this book does not lay claim to such a focus, I am pleased that the attention of readers of this journal is being directed to it. Of course, any text dealing with human crises must encompass ethical issues or dilemmas, either explicitly or implicitly. Professional carers specifically, confronted with human beings in grief for whatever reasons, must be aware of the ethical foundations on which the caring process is based. The two authors clearly demonstrate such awareness. Their sensitivity to the bereaved person's rights, dignity and individuality permeates the text throughout.

The book makes an important contribution to the understanding of loss in its widest sense to include not only death, but also events like the loss of status, of a relationship, of a faculty or of material possessions. The reader is taken right through the complex process of the loss experience and the subsequent grief. Available literature and the authors' personal experiences are used as signposts. The resulting volume achieves an admirable balance between generalisable practical guidelines and most careful attention to individual needs and problems. For example, two flow charts, taken from Which Books 1986 simplify the practical arrangements after death and in relation to the funeral, which bereaved people often find so bewildering. They are excellent general guidelines. The constant emphasis on the need for individual assessment as a basis for appropriate after-care demonstrates the importance of individual differences.

A reading list for the bereaved and a list of useful addresses are added benefits.

Although there seems to be a distinct decrease in the taboo surrounding death in Western society, there remains a good deal of confusion, anxiety and fear. This clear, informative, sensitive and well presented publication provides valuable help for those who attempt to care for bereaved persons.

LISBETH HOCKEY
Research Consultant,
Flat 2, Silverknowes House,
1 Silverknowes Road, Edinburgh 4

Ethics and Human Values in Family Planning

Z Bankowski, J Bazelatto, AM Capron,
308 pages, Geneva, 20 SFR (UK price
unstated), Council for International
Organisations of Medical Sciences
(CIOMS), 1989

This book is derived from the XXII CIOMS Conference held in Bangkok in 1988. However, in comparison with many similar volumes of proceedings from multi-disciplinary conferences its layout has been arranged to state first, an objective, second, the material for deliberation and finally such consensus as was derived. The material is not laid out succinctly and in some respects this is a difficult volume to follow. However, once the reader has begun to find his or her way through the contributions it does become a very readable and very original book.

The phrase 'family planning' encompasses a wide range of activities in reproductive medicine including abortion, sterilisation, treatment and research into infertility and prenatal diagnosis - the whole field of reproductive medicine. The book commences with full coverage in the first six pages of the remarks made at the opening of the conference. These serve to underline the WHO's concerns with the issues facing family planning worldwide and the need to find common ground amid the wide range of medical, sociological, philosophical, religious and political factors influencing the provision of reproductive health care globally. These remarks are echoed in the keynote address by Dr Anne McLaren. Apart from restating the conference's objective, this contribution is an excellent introduction to the material discussed elsewhere. Two subsequent sections of the book examine from two different perspectives, the spectrum of issues under consideration. First, four chapters deal with ethical, cultural, religious, scientific and demographical perspectives. Each of these is written by acknowledged experts in their own field, who have chosen language easy to understand by colleagues in other disciplines. The following section examines the same complex array of issues from a regional point of view, with chapters dealing with Africa, Latin America, Europe and North America, Asia and Oceania and finally the Middle East. Most of these concentrate on historical and demographical factors that modify or are modified by cultural and religious settings, an aspect of the problem that is often overlooked in less internationally orientated works. Such consensus as was derived was enumerated, first in the reports of the working groups that dealt with family planning and health services, family planning methods, infertility, prenatal diagnosis and research in fertility and infertility. Further consolidation of views is given in a series of reflections on the conference from the perspectives of an ethicist, a lawyer, a bio-medical scientist, a social scientist, a health policy maker and a lay person. In view of the thoroughness with which this topic is explored, I can thoroughly recommend this book to anyone involved in reproductive medicine, either internationally or in any setting that could be vaguely construed as multicultural.