Making Sense of Advance Directives (2nd ed)


What did Richard Nixon and Jacky Onassis have in common? Both died in mid-1994 in the same New York hospital but according to Nancy King, the thing which caught public attention about both deaths was the hospital's compliance with their "living wills", which refused treatment. These so fascinated the public that the hospital switchboard was jammed for days with enquiries about "choice in dying". Beyond the American health system, however, the notion of people documenting in advance how medical decisions should be made at the end of their lives barely impinges on public consciousness. For the world at large, the level of fear of over-treatment is swamped by greater anxiety about getting too little - or inequitable access to - health care. Nor have comparable public figures, such as the Queen or Mrs Thatcher, displayed the same assiduity as the former US president in giving a lead in such advance planning. Could it be that Americans are simply less fearful of contemplating death... less thanatophic than the rest of us?

On the contrary, one of the doubtless unintended themes of Nancy King's book is the contrast between the lukewarm public commitment to advance directives and the strong theoretical support for them from ethicists and law-makers. The book, which updates the 1991 version of the same title, seeks to convince clinicians and patients that they should give more serious attention to living wills. For, despite the publicity boost of the Nixon/Onassis demises, a dozen high-profile legal cases from Quinlan in 1976 to Cruzan in 1994, a plethora of books and articles (King lists over 200 reference titles), 89 federal acts on this issue and legislation requiring health facilities to promote advance directives in order to receive Medicare and Medicaid dollars, less than twenty per cent of Americans actually have one. This reluctance to think ahead about future mental incapacity and death spurs the author to suggest that "we could perhaps force a flowering of foresight" by legislating...