

Palliative Care, Social Work and Service Users: Making Life Possible

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272pp, pbk, £22.99, Jessica Kingsley Publications, 2007 ISBN 1 84310 465 2



Well over twenty years ago, after university, I spent a year working at the internationally renowned St. Christopher's Hospice, South London. The work of its director, Dame Cicely Saunders had achieved acclaim – my role for that year as a nursing auxiliary, gave me some unique insights into the theory and practice of death. The experience was enlarging and infinitely demanding and, as is often the case, the best teachers were those patients who cared for me as they embraced their dying with courage. I became aware then of the, perhaps inevitable, gap between what an organisation aspires to do in theory and what it is able to do in practice through its employees and processes of care. Despite all best efforts sometimes professionals, believing that they know best, attempt to fit people into theories and systems with often disastrous results.

It gives me no real cause for pleasure to reflect on the absolute necessity of such a book as this some twenty five years later. We still have a long way to go in order to design and deliver services around individuals and their needs. Choice, equality and empowerment are still too far down on the care agenda. Once again Jessica Kingsley takes a risk in publishing another pioneering book. Pioneering because it investigates specialist palliative care social work from the view point of service users. The authors track the patient's experience through care and link these critiques with broader debates and developments in policy and practice.

Eager to listen and learn from the individual the authors consider the implications of the researcher's findings for the formation of policy and practice for future education and training. The result is one of the most stimulating and rewarding books on palliative that I have come across for some time. The sheer quality of the book's collaborative research and rigour bear much fruit for any reader wishing to have their presuppositions challenged with a view to developing and improving practice. I wish I could offer other practical ways in which some of the findings of this book might be used and reflected upon by a wider group of professionals, especially those in charge of policy formation and the training of those who wish to care and support others.

It is significant that this book has come out of a social work context – I could hardly imagine doctors thinking so fundamentally about the theory and practice of medicine in this way. In this regard we are also offered a model for other professions to think through who they are and what they believe they are doing through the eyes of clients and patients. We need professionals like this – we need to be safeguarded from a professionalism which fails to innovate, respond and in the end, radically serve the needs of those who are dying.

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