

The Needs of the Dying: A Guide for Bringing Hope, Comfort, and Love to Life's Final Chapter, 10th anniversary ed.

by David Kessler. HarperCollins, New York, N.Y., 2007, 256 pages, \$13.95 (paper).

If we could remember to treat the living well, we wouldn't need to remember the rights of the dying; we would meet their needs already.

—Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Dying. It is a topic that makes most people in our longevity-focused society uncomfortable, even those of us who have committed our lives to treating the sick. Unless you are a health care professional who specializes in working with the dying, as is David Kessler, death is not likely to be a topic that is discussed in the everyday interactions between most physicians and patients. In fact, I suspect most of us avoid discussing death. The modern medical model has molded us to focus our efforts on aggressive interventions focused on curative attempts. Pressures from society suggest that we have failed as physicians if we are unable to “save” our patients. For as much as it is a part of life guaranteed for all of us, death is often left out of medical school curricula and avoided in daily interactions with patients and families. Yet, the issue of dying is one that weighs heavily on many patients' minds—a topic that many wish to discuss with their physicians. Recent media attention, including that for Terri Schiavo's case, has reminded us that we have yet to conclude our national conversation about what constitutes a good death, making David Kessler's 10th anniversary edition of *The Needs of the Dying* a timely and a much-needed resource.

Originally published in 1997 under the title *The Rights of the Dying*, the new title reveals a change in societal and medical views coinciding with the shift beyond the dialectic between autonomy-based and paternalism-based medical ethics. Through personal examples experienced by Kessler in his work as a nurse in the hospice movement and as a pupil of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, this book brings to us gentle examples of how we, as health care workers, can bring comfort to those we cannot cure. Mr. Kessler reminds us that the best way to treat a *dying* patient is to remember that he or she is still a *living* patient. Clinicians are encouraged by Kessler to embrace rather than to abandon our patients at the end of life. He recognizes that while discussing death with patients is difficult, it can also be “liberating.” The book is replete with examples of how to initiate discussions about dying and how to ensure that patients do not suffer physically or emotionally at the end of life.

With his simple, straightforward language, Mr. Kessler has also created a valuable asset for any patient or family dealing with the end of life. Addressing such topics as participation in medical decision-making, pain management, spirituality, and grief, *The Needs of the Dying* empowers both health care professionals and patients to engage, rather than to avoid, each other during the last days of life. Kessler describes typical emotions and physiologic changes experienced by patients as they are dying and allows us to learn how to address these changes in a constructive way. He encourages the idea of giving hope to those we may feel have hopeless cases by realizing that there is always a way that we can make a patient or loved one feel more comfortable, less alone, and more loved.

In the 10th anniversary edition, Kessler has also included information on the rapidly growing palliative care movement, his experiences on patient visions at the end of life, and a brief and touching memoir on the loss of his mentor Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. While some texts fade from relevance in even just a few years, David Kessler's *The Needs of the Dying* continues to be a resource for all that will live on.

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