

Play review: 'Home Death' by Nell Dunn, reviewed by Dr Paul Barker, Macmillan GP, Dorset

'I didn't know, I didn't know what dying looks like. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to help him'.

Nell misses such simple things about her husband Dan Oestreicher, who died 3 years ago. A table and chairs on the garden patio. Television programs enjoyed as a couple. Dan was diagnosed with lung cancer in 2010 and wished to die at home. The treatment phase of his illness was by comparison, far easier to accept and understand than the last few weeks at home.

During the last weeks of life he was visited by a whole range of health professionals, none of whom seemed to be able to facilitate a death at home or indeed to recognise the 'shape' of a home death. In the last 24 hours Dan was visited by 4 district nurses and one doctor and yet died in pain and feeling that he was suffocating.

Dunn's experience with Dann, gives voice to end of life care decision making from a patients and carers perspective. One of the vignettes relates to Jazz singer George Melly whose stellar career ended with vascular dementia. Melly had been a patron dignity in dying and had access to Marie Curie and Admiral nurses who made the experience of home death less traumatic.

I was struck by the confusion chaos and fear that comes from choosing to die at home. From health professional's seeming obsession with 'that ghastly bed', To a freewheeling sense of being out of any control; Dunn brings a new perspective on dying with dignity at home.

Each of the vignettes is a true-life story told in Dunn's usual gritty and unabashed style. Each touches upon aspects of home dying that are both intensely personal and tragic, as well as making uncomfortable reading for healthcare providers.

I think that the power in this short series of tableaux comes from understanding the dying process from the perspective of frightened patient or carer. Just how alienated and alone they felt. Just how disempowered from making decisions relating to their own experience of dying and death at home.

As GPs and hospice doctors, it's salutary to realise that the space between professional visits is filled with angst uncertainty and fear. And how powerfully we can influence -for good or bad- a family's experience of dying in their own home.

Home Death is a brilliant, often brutal, reminder of the realities of dying at home and the impact of a 'bad death' upon those left behind.

Home Death by Nell Dunn. Nick Hern Books. London 2011. ISBN 978 1 84842 195 0