

The indignity of dying

This notion could not be raised in case of sudden death for there is no lingering when the person dies in an instant. The care of others in such cases is redundant bar looking after a dead body. But most pass into a stage when all their bodily functions rely on others as they unstoppably make their way into oblivion and it is then that all dignity is lost.

For months cancer had been eating away my mother's body making her weaker by the day. It was only a question when she would go. Even though I knew she neared her end it was shocking when I arrived in the ward of a spotless hospital in the middle of Luxembourg to see the mother who brought me up, loved me all my life now wrapped in a nappy. She was already in the morphine stage pumped full of chemicals to ease the pain during the hours, days left to her.

She was asleep or perhaps unconscious as I bent over to kiss her. I sat by her bed until she came around recognising me and then suddenly sprang up '*Sanyi, quickly we must escape from here, go somewhere, hurry*'*. I knew this was delirium speaking but also a cry for help to escape from a place where every moment of her existence was in the hands of others. Of course these others, the nurses, did whatever was needed for her comfort but all the same she was taken over. In a hospital the patient in her condition has no free will. The whole terrible situation gripped me, here was my mother with no way back, hers was now an existence without dignity but with pain; the sooner it was over the better for her sake. She slumped into another bout of deep morphine induced sleep. I found a middle-aged nurse asking if anything could be done to speed up her end and stop further suffering. Of course she could not promise anything like that but gave me a sympathetic look. The hospital was attached to a convent from where the nuns also ended their days. She said that they suffered the most, painkillers were not allowed for them. They died in agony in their final sacrifice for Jesus' slow death on the cross? I left the hospital in deep sadness to come back next day.

In the morning before reaching the ward the nurse came up to me saying my mother died overnight and was laid out in a private room where I could have a last look at her. There my mother laid, life left her, the skin was grey, the face smooth. I bent over kissing the cold forehead. The mother whom I had all my life has now become an object, for a dead body is just that. The living mother remained in me for always. Did the nurse help her along? Not that it mattered.

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* I have since discovered that my mother suddenly springing up is a common condition of those who are about to die.

The sudden death is a great fortune for those who go and shock for those who remain. Whenever I hear of someone who just did not wake up any more, fell face down over their desks or never regained consciousness from a stroke I think how lucky they were, no suffering, no fear, no contemplation of what comes after. Literally a buffer hit them but they did not see it coming. Why end life, our very greatest fortune, by having to plead for escape from suffering that the medical profession is dedicated to prolong?

I had a science fiction solution to this, something that occupied me in my younger years, of inserting in everyone a microchip programmed to end the life of individuals in an instant at a predetermined time but of course not known to the person when. The 'everyone' then could go about their lives knowing they would end painlessly. This though would have had several problems. First the timing, how many years to allocate in each case, we would not want to limit Einstein's life to thirty! Then a sudden death in the middle of the street would be shockingly unfair to all those passing by. And everyone would have to carry a life of uncertainty even with a promise of painless end. Would people strive if they had a Guillotine hanging over them, 'the why bother if I can be dead in any minute'. So I think the killer microchip has to remain science fiction but the desirability of sudden death remains of when and how.

It has to be in the remit of the individual, the older we get the more likely develop a fatal illness and the more sudden death becomes desirable. Or should we have ourselves scanned for fatal illnesses and, this is science fiction again, if the machine detects something that will kill us with pain insert the killer chip for instant death in a time frame but keeping us in the dark of when. It all comes down to avoiding the painful undignified end. No more need for hospices; hospitals would only occupy themselves with those for whom there could be a cure; old age homes, home visits would be reduced and the money saved spent on the young and vigorous to live their lives to the full until their own sudden end came.

Not *A Brave New World*; not a *1984*; no this would be a *World of Painless Ends*.

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This paper touches on the same subject but stating that 85 is the optimum age for a life, however it was written in 2001 and since then that limit has gone up.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1120113/>