

Death...and the fear of upsetting others

Kathryn Mannix interviewed by Katie Macleod

“People are so daunted by fear, not of something supernatural, but just of getting upset in front of each other, that they won't talk about dying.”

“And because they won't talk about dying, they're not ready for it when it happens.” Dr. Kathryn Mannix knows a lot about death – as a palliative care doctor, she's seen it many times – and with her best-selling book, *With The End In Mind*, she's on a mission to change our understanding of it.

Kathryn will be discussing this fear, and our attitudes towards death, at An Lanntair's Faclan book festival on November 2nd. “It's going to be, I hope, thought-provoking, but in a way that will have people smiling, as well as maybe a little teary,” she says. “When you've seen an awful lot of deaths, and you can talk about dying in the same voice you use when you're deciding what to have for dinner, people stop being quite so tense.”

Released in 2017, *With The End In Mind* was shortlisted for the 2018 Wellcome Prize (which recognises books that engage with medicine, health or illness), and is being translated into 12 languages. It shares more than 30 patient stories – all anonymous, and all taken from Kathryn's work over 30 years as a palliative care physician – and “describes what happened to them, how they dealt with it, what the challenges were, and how they resolved their challenges.”

The book was born, in a way, in her early years of medical school, when Kathryn kept notes, handwritten on A4 sheets of paper, as a way of decompressing at the end of a difficult or profound day at work. She used these notes to jog her memory for the book (although some of the stories had stayed with her for years), which was set in motion after a literary agent heard her speaking about death in a BBC Radio 4 interview. “I would never have dreamt of any of it,” says Kathryn. “It's been absolutely amazing. What's really lovely is I've had the most fantastic letters from people who've read the book, people who are terminally ill, bereaved people. I thought it might be in a few libraries, but people are reading it all over the world.”



Perhaps it's not so surprising; as a child, Kathryn lined up her teddies and dolls in 'hospital beds' made from fold-up chairs, and made charts for each one. “My Mum's still got a piece of paper with my six-year-old writing, and it says ‘Teddy: broken leg and leprosy.’” She had always wanted to be a doctor, although nearly switched to nursing halfway through medical school when she realised it was the nurses, not the doctors, who really got to know their patients one-on-one.

Luckily, “palliative care came along at just about the right time” for her, and while working in oncology, she applied for a job at a newly opened hospice. Kathryn went on to become a founding member of the Association for Palliative Medicine, working in palliative care teams until she took early retirement to speak about and change the public perception of dying.

“I'm trying to put back into public understanding what people would have known 100 years ago, because they'd have seen death loads of times,” she explains. “We don't need to be so afraid, because the thing about dying is it's probably not as bad as you're expecting. It's not like on *EastEnders*. It's perfectly possible to do it relatively comfortably, in the peace and quiet of your own home.” With Dr. Kathryn Mannix sharing the message, people are beginning to listen.

Kathryn will be at An Lanntair on Friday 2nd November at 5pm.