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Matters of life and death: Key writings

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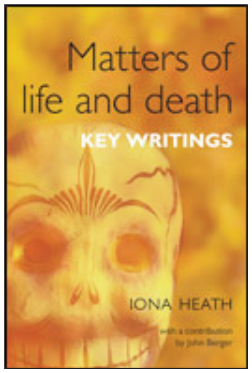
MATTERS OF LIFE AND DEATH: KEY WRITINGS
IONA HEATH

Radcliffe Publishing, 2008
PB, 126 pages, £17.95, 1846190967



These essays from the pricker of British medical establishment conscience are thought-provoking and controversial. There is pleasure in their literary accompaniments: poems and philosophical musings, interspersed with granite logic, beautifully simply written. I learned new ideas: the important things in helping people die are finding meaning in their lives; acting as a witness; and being the familiar of death. If this sounds nonsense to you, read the book. The important things are continuity, touch, perhaps even allowing pain to be experienced, continuity of care, but more; continuity of the dead with the living, encouraging the evocation of memories, talking even when the patient is too exhausted to reciprocate. There's no talk of 'spirit'; this is neither religious nor sentimental. General practice care for the dying is our quintessence.

Greater context comes from the earlier writings from 1995, dated as they are (referring to Thatcher rather than Blair, now both history). We will forgive the overly British focus and some repetition because such important things of general practice are being lost. These writings show us how we let them slip out of our grasp, and we should be ashamed.

Chris Del Mar

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