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## Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

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# Obituaries

## Elisabeth Kübler-Ross

Psychiatrist and pioneer of the death-and-dying movement

In her groundbreaking bestseller *On Death and Dying*, Elisabeth Kübler-Ross overturned how physicians treat dying patients. When the book was published in 1969, death was a taboo subject and discussing it was considered morbid. Patients died alone in hospitals; physicians ignored them; and adequate pain medication was underused. The book brought these practices to the fore—and pressed for more humane treatment of the dying.

The book rocked the medical profession—and at the same time also resulted in a public outcry for compassionate care of the dying. *On Death and Dying* is a classic work and is still in print around the world today.

Kübler-Ross's work stemmed from the realisation that in her native Switzerland, death, like birth, was considered a normal part of the life cycle. In Switzerland people died at home surrounded by family and friends—and they were comfortable until the end of their lives. In contrast in the United States and other countries that placed a premium on high tech medicine, patients lay by the wayside. It was a practice she deplored.

A hallmark of Kübler-Ross's work was her emphasis on communication. She stressed that patients truly wanted to review their lives, their deterioration, and imminent death. When patients and doctors could talk openly—and without fear—a good death could be achieved.

In 1967 Kübler-Ross began interviewing dying patients at the University of Chicago's Billings Hospital, where she was a psychiatrist. She hoped to learn what patients were thinking as they lay dying.

From her first hand research, she derived the famous five stage framework: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—or, as she called it, “one common denominator” of death and dying. The model outlined how patients with terminal illness grappled with their diagnosis, and their emotions along the way, right through to acceptance of their impending death. She appealed to the medical community to use it.

Collin Murray Parkes, consultant psychiatrist at St Christopher's Hospice in London, credits Kübler-Ross's five stage framework and its high visibility as a driving force in stimulating research and changing



AP PHOTOS

practice in the death and dying field. However, he said that the model had not proved durable. “Like all pioneers, we learn that the new concept is not as simple as initially described,” Dr Murray Parkes told the *BMJ*. “It's no longer considered a linear progression, a one size fits all approach. There's so much more we know today.”

Kübler-Ross's excellent communication skills with patients extended to lectures and workshops held around the world. Balfour Mount, chair of palliative care at McGill University in Montreal, remembers how she addressed more than 5000 surgeons at an American College of Surgeons meeting, one of hundreds appearances she made around the world. “It was as if they were transfixed by her,” he said.

Mount called her “one of the most effective communicators of the 20th century. She was a very skilled listener and a role model for patient interviewing and active listening, and she established an entirely new field of practice—“narrative medicine.”

Yet Kübler-Ross also had a reputation for being single minded and difficult, according to many colleagues. “She had plenty of devotees, but she found it difficult to relate on an equal basis to her own peers,” commented Dr Murray Parkes. “She always had to be her own centre.”

*On Death and Dying* and the five stages are not her only legacy. Kübler-Ross was also a prolific author of more than 20 books. Her interests also became more specialised, addressing, for example, the care of dying

children (*On Children and Death*) and HIV infected people, including prisoners with AIDS (*AIDS: The Ultimate Challenge*).

In an interview with ABC News in the United States on 18 December 2001 she said that she was most proud of her work with people with AIDS and creating hospice care for prisoners with AIDS. Her last project, building a hospice for children with AIDS in Virginia, ended with a suspicious fire. It also destroyed many unpublished papers. Soon after, she moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, to be close to her son.

Kübler-Ross was one of identical triplets. She was determined to make an immense impact on the world. Her father was less than supportive, insisting that she become his secretary. She told ABC News that she had dreamed of becoming the next Albert Schweitzer, the medical missionary and Nobel prize winner.

She graduated from medical school at the University of Zurich and married a classmate, Emanuel Ross. They moved to the United States in 1958 and had two children. They later divorced. In 1963 Kübler-Ross was awarded her medical degree from the University of Colorado in Denver. By then, she had strong academic interest in death-and-dying concerns. During her lifetime, she was awarded more than 25 honorary doctorates. Despite her many accomplishments, she drew a lot of criticism when she embraced metaphysics, near death and out of body experiences, and an afterlife.


In 1995 she had her first stroke. After several strokes left her increasingly debilitated, Kübler-Ross said that she was preparing for her own death. Reporters sought her out for interviews and several documentaries were filmed. At times, she said that she had skipped the first four stages—was at the acceptance stage and ready to die. At other times, close friends were not so sure: they sensed resignation and depression. [LAURA NEWMAN]

*Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, former psychiatrist Chicago and Arizona (b Zurich 1926, q University of Colorado 1963), d 24 August 2004.*

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## Henry Matthew Adam

*Former reader in pharmacology University of Edinburgh (b 1911; q Edinburgh 1935; FRSE), died from colon cancer on 18 June 2004.*

During the second world war Henry served in the Royal Army Medical Corps, first on trooping duties in convoys to the Middle East, then in field ambulance work. He was later seconded to the US army on scientific intelligence; his last duty was entry into the Nazi extermination camp at Buchenwald to rescue scientists before the Russians arrived. On demobilisation, he took up a lectureship in pharmacology at Edinburgh. By developing sensitive biological assays, Henry was able to demonstrate the presence of histamine in the blood and urine of healthy individuals and later its hormone action in stimulating acid secretion in the stomach. For many years he was editor of the *British Journal of Pharmacology*. His wife, Katherine, predeceased him. [KEITH VICKERMAN] 

## James Paton Orr Erskine

*Former consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist Vale of Leven District General Hospital, Alexandria, Dunbartonshire (b 1915; q Glasgow 1937; FRCP Glas, FRCOG), died from pneumonia complicating a stroke on 10 July 2004.*


Orr became a consultant at Glasgow Royal Maternity Hospital and the Royal Samaritan Hospital for Women before being appointed consultant to Dunbarton County, initially singlehanded and working at a number of small hospitals. In 1953-4 the Vale of Leven Hospital was opened, gynaecology came under one roof, and a second consultant was appointed. In 1970 a maternity unit was opened on the hospital site and a third consultant arrived to complete the team. Orr's main interest, clinically, was radical surgery for cervical cancer. He retired from practice in 1980. Predeceased by his first two wives, he leaves his third wife, Margaret, and a stepdaughter. [ALEX CLARK, DAVID ERSKINE] 

## Grace Trespass Lennon (née Dawson)




*Former general practitioner Brisbane, Australia (b Wigan 1917; q Liverpool 1940; DOBst RCOG), died from bronchopneumonia on 6 July 2004.*

In 1943 Grace enlisted in the Royal Air Force and was stationed at Halton in Buckinghamshire. There occupational therapy was her

main concern. In 1946 she married Thomas Lennon, and for the next 15 years worked part time in maternity and child welfare and started a family. In 1961 Tom died from bowel cancer (obituary *BMJ* 26 August 1961, p 590). Two years later Grace emigrated to Brisbane with four children to join a practice established by a friend from medical school. All her life Grace was concerned with the status of women, and in Brisbane she was secretary (1968-73), then president (1978-80), of the Queensland Medical Women's Association. She leaves three children. [TIM LENNON, RUTH BAKER] 


## Thomas Mowbray Nott-Bower

*Former general practitioner Weston-super-Mare (b Richmond, Surrey, 1921; q St Mary's Hospital, Paddington, 1945), died from bladder cancer on 12 June 2004.*

Tom Nott-Bower arrived in Weston-super-Mare in 1957 to begin his career in general practice. He also worked as clinical assistant in obstetrics, on one memorable occasion delivering undiagnosed triplets, and took up a post as police surgeon, thereby involving himself in almost every part of local medical life. Tom did national service in the Royal Air Force, and continued on a short service commission, leaving as squadron leader in 1951. Predeceased by his first wife, Peggy, he leaves his second wife, Jill, two daughters, two stepdaughters, and his grandchildren. [CATHERINE PRESTON] 

## Frederick Leonard Richardson

*Former associate professor of paediatrics Johns Hopkins Medical School, Baltimore, Maryland, United States (b 1926; q Birmingham 1950; MD, FRCP, FRACP), died in a car crash on 5 March 2004 while being trained to drive a vehicle with handicap controls.*


Fred contracted poliomyelitis in his final year at medical school. After studying paediatrics at Oxford and Great Ormond Street, in 1957 he obtained an appointment at Johns Hopkins, where his interest in handicapped children developed further. Ten years later he obtained the funding for, and was appointed the first director of, the John F Kennedy Institute for the Rehabilitation of Children in Baltimore. Later he obtained the funding for, and became the first director of, the Mailman Centre for Childhood Development in the University of Miami. He leaves his second wife, Virginia; two children; two stepchildren; and six grandchildren. [MICHAEL DRURY] 

## David Bamford Williamson

*Former general practitioner Kirkbymoorside (b Edinburgh 1928; q Edinburgh 1952; DRCOG), died from ischaemic heart disease on 10 May 2004.*

David did his national service in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve, based in the south Atlantic. His postgraduate medical training was in Newcastle, Alnwick, and Edinburgh, where he met and married Elizabeth, a fellow doctor from Birmingham. They



moved to Kirkbymoorside, on the edge of the North Yorkshire moors, where David worked in general practice. David also immersed himself in the life of the local community, serving on the town council, and acting as chairman of governors for local schools. He was actively involved in the church, as well as being a local magistrate. In retirement he was town mayor for two years. He leaves Elizabeth, four children, and three grandchildren. [HUGH WILLIAMSON] 

## Margaret Wilson (née Fyfe)



*Former clinical medical officer Dudley (b Oldham 1928; q Glasgow 1951; DRCOG, DA), d 18 January 2004.*

Margaret took anaesthetic qualifications in 1954. She met her husband, Eric, at Dudley Road Hospital, Birmingham, and after marriage they settled in a general practice in Dudley, West Midlands. Margaret's medical work initially was sessional anaesthetics and later women's health, which she continued until retirement. In 1972 she was appointed as a magistrate in Dudley and later became chairman of the bench. Margaret was a regular church attender and involved in the local branch of Relate. Predeceased by Eric, she leaves three children and four grandsons. [ROY O WALKER, JANIE M WILSON]

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