

Dying on a retirement estate – or not.

John Ridpath

When I came into this retirement estate of bungalows I found I had neighbours of R in number 23 and W in number 25, both ten years older than me, amongst about thirty retirees when full. I believe their closing pages of living were typical.

R became irrational, mildly a nuisance, and unsafe at around eighty eight. She progressed through extra helping care by a professional, with a visible improvement from this and drug treatment. Later she was found on the car park at 6.30 am face upward in rain, taken to hospital, survived and moved to a care home on her ninety-first birthday. A year later I have to ask the Warden if she is still alive. There is no obligation for any party to inform anyone else of any situation beyond a couple of officials and the nearest relative.

W moved to a care home in March 2006 and after frequent visits back and forth, was hospitalised for a few days and died in March 2007, as I was told by a neighbour, near her ninetyfirst birthday.

In the estate I cannot think of a single case of anyone dying in their own home. The only concession to process is, in three cases, that I have noticed, the funeral cortege was started from our car park. Our large company freeholder seems to have a clear policy of indirect evasion of dying on their patch.

Recently I have been reading a book 'The Living End — The Future of Death, Ageing and Immortality', which I cannot recommend too highly. 'Death is not what it once was. The decline of acute death by infections, starvation, violence and heart attack has allowed people to reach extreme old age, but has ushered in disability, dementia and degenerative disease, with profound consequences for the self and society'. 'Dr Guy Brown heads a research group at the University of Cambridge, UK, working on cell death in the brain, heart and in cancer.' But his book is not for the squeamish, especially the statistics.

His team does not confirm the Kubler-Ross (1969) findings that there are often five stages of dying leading to a peaceful state of acceptance. Instead they found general lethargy, exhaustion, and finally giving up even in the hospices they visited, with little difference between religious believers and non-believers.

Brown, Guy. The Living End: The Future of Death, Ageing and Immortality. Palgrave Macmillan 2007.