

Lynda was right — we need to talk about death more often

Carol Midgley



Lynda Bellingham hoped to spend one last Christmas with her family but, as it turned out, Death had other plans. Mere days after appearing on TV, a luminous, positive life-force in pale pink refusing to do her dying politely behind closed doors, but instead showing us all what it looks like, the actress succumbed abruptly to her terminal cancer. How perverse life can be.

On the same day, we learnt of the death of another woman, Jean Davies, who had starved herself over five agonising weeks because she couldn't bear living with her non-terminal but debilitating illness in a country where assisted dying is illegal. Here was one person, Bellingham, asking for just a few more weeks with her family yet dying too soon and here was another asking for the opposite, for the end to come faster, frustrated and appalled by how surprisingly long it can take to famish an 86-year-old body to death.

Bellingham is rightly celebrated for showing us how to die well. She faced it head-on and with spirited defiance, dismissing all prissy euphemisms and told us just how it is with bowel cancer (she called her colostomy bag "Furby" because of the noise it made when emptied). "As a society, we never talk about it, we never face it — even though it's everywhere," she said.

Another political Bungle

After some joker tampered with his Wikipedia entry, the deputy leader of Ukup has been forced to deny that he once played Bungle in Rainbow, the

1970s kids' TV show. Unhelpful for any MP's dignity that people might think that they once titted about as a giant, gormless teddy bear forever sucking up to Geoffrey. Wisely, Paul Nuttall has seen the funny side.

Eric Pickles's entry was reportedly once altered to state that he was a Sontaran, the humanoid race from

Dr Who characterised by a large, bulbous head and described as looking like a "talking baked potato". This seems worse than being accused of playing an effeminate teddy bear with a very low IQ. Still, it's an amusing game. Any ideas for a political duo that might suit the roles of Zippy and George? I'll come to me eventually ...



"We must talk about death." Davies would have agreed, having campaigned for much of her life to reform the law to let doctors administer lethal medication to patients who want to die. Which is why her courageous act of defiance deserves just as much attention and admiration as Bellingham's.

By going public with her hideously protracted act of suicide (when she stopped drinking water, she hoped her death would take three days; it took another fortnight), Davies, a former maths teacher, spotlighted the flinty piety of those who say a sentient person should not have the final say over how and when they die, but must carry on living until nature decides. Don't they see to what terrible ends such intractability drives people? Davies would be bullied into living on other people's terms, so, fearing that an overdose might not work, she bravely chose the only legal way she knew, a path she described as "intolerable" and as "hell", but one over which she at least had some control. Both women were, in their own ways, trying to bring about a more sensible, humane society in which death is not treated as a taboo skulking in the shadows.

And look at how the campaign director of Care Not Killing responded to Davies's death. Though what she did is not illegal, said Peter Saunders, "neither is it right" and by going public she was adopting a "subtle form of emotional blackmail aimed at softening opposition to a change in the law". Ye gods. If I wasn't already a supporter of assisted dying, I certainly would be after reading that. For an organisation with the word "care" in its title, there seems to be precious little of it in those cold words.

How to feel like parent of the year

If any Slightly Crap Mothers are reading (ie, those who count ketchup as part of their kids' five-a-day), then do watch last Sunday's episode of *Homeland*. You'll feel like Parent of the Year.

In the episode, CIA chief Carrie Mathison seems to contemplate drowning her baby. It's a distressing scene in which the child endures a light waterboarding before mum snaps out of it, something I sense will keep Ofcom busy for a while. Given that the *Peppa Pig* show received complaints when the family of cartoon pigs failed to wear seatbelts in their cartoon car, viewers may well implode over the depiction of an unstable mother almost committing infanticide, placing her baby in the front seat of her car (very bad) and holding her with all the fondness you might do a skunk evacuating its stink glands over your new suede boots.

Incidentally, I've just received an ironic cookery book called *Baking Bad*, in which you can make cake versions of, say, Gus's half-blown-off head in *Breaking Bad*. Since bad taste sells, maybe we should expect for the Christmas market a spoof Mathison *Guide to Baby Care*, in which you end up getting posted to Islamabad just to ensure you never have to read *Room on the Broom*.

The woman who offers abortions on the high seas

A Dutch mother has helped thousands to end pregnancies on her ship. Rebecca Gomperts' enemies call her a pirate. By Helen Rumbelow

Rebecca Gomperts has been called a pirate, and it's easy to see why when you watch her slight form standing at the prow of her boat, swashbuckling with her all-female crew into some of the most repressive or conservative countries of the world. At one point, in Spain, a group of enemy vigilantes try to tow her boat out of port and she jumps around on deck cutting off their ropes with a triumphant expression.

You can also see why she doesn't like the pirate idea: first, she's a doctor and she's not doing anything exactly illegal (although she has come up with one audacious ruse after another to circumvent national law). And second, since her ship offers abortions, what exactly, as a pirate, would she be stealing — foetuses?

Instead, Gomperts styles herself a public-health physician first, a direct-action, human-rights campaigner second and, in the mix, a mother. She has just put her kids, eight and nine, to bed when we speak. I ask Gomperts what has been her most dangerous moment. A new documentary about her life, called *Vessel*, opens with her surrounded by a mob of men after landing in Morocco. They grab at her ferociously, shouting in her face: "Abortion is treachery!" She looks like she's about to be killed. Was it then, I ask.

"No, the situation there was scary, but the scariest moment of my life was in Spain. That was the only time I brought my kids, and they were quite young. They were walking towards the ship with the nanny at the same time as the anti-abortion protesters were approaching us. I was afraid they might know they were my children. But since I've become a mother, of course I'm more vulnerable, and I feel more vulnerable. My children are the first thing that matters."

No Hollywood drama could match the real-life risks Gomperts has taken. On the one hand she is a sensible person who says that her children have deepened her commitment to legal abortion, unwanted babies only increasing the world's unhappiness. On the other, she is a radical who has sacrificed financial security and safety to this unpleasant and ignored cause. Ever since she first sailed her abortion ship into Ireland in 2001 this has been her life.

"That first trip to Ireland was an eye-opener. The amount of requests for help we received at the time — and after that, and constantly, emails coming in from women all over the world who are so desperate. It's so unfair, especially when you know how safe a medical abortion can be."

When Gomperts was in her twenties, she worked in a field hospital in west Africa. There she would try to patch up women arriving mutilated by what in Britain used to be called "backstreet" abortions.

"They would come in, bleeding heavily, almost dying. The local doctors would mention abortion being illegal, but I didn't really listen, I

“If men could get pregnant there wouldn't be abortion laws

assumed they were in this way because of a lack of health services."

According to the World Health Organisation, 22 million women every year have this kind of "unsafe" abortion, and 47,000 of them die as a result; that's about one in eight of all maternal deaths. "These stories," Gomperts says, "are just not discussed. They're out of the public domain."

In the 1990s, two scientific advances came together. First, the internet, giving people free information despite repressive regimes. Second, the discovery of drugs that safely induced miscarriages in the first nine weeks of pregnancy, a so-called "medical abortion". This is as safe as a natural miscarriage, and if a woman needed to seek medical help afterwards, doctors could not discern if she had ended the pregnancy herself. This is important where abortion is illegal.

Her first trip to Ireland was with the intention of taking the pregnant women in need on board, 12 miles offshore, into international waters, where she would prescribe them the



pill out of Irish jurisdiction. She didn't pull it off then, although she did later off the coast of Spain and Portugal. As the emails poured in, though, she realised it would be more ambitious to operate in the "international waters" of the web. The boat trips now are just for publicity; her organisation, Women on Web, instead offers women all over the world advice on medical abortion using drugs blagged from local pharmacies, or gives them an online consultation with a doctor and the drugs are then posted to them.

She believes these abortion drugs are so safe they should be sold over the counter, no doctor necessary. I reply that even I, an ardent pro-choicer, finds that a little unsettling. Yes, she says, they've had people "make these fake arguments" — that a woman may try too late (this is ineffective and risks birth defects), or an unwilling father could slip these drugs into his wife's drink. But we live with all sorts of dangerous drugs in the home, she says, and we trust people to use them responsibly.

Her organisation gets 8,000 emails a

month from women and helps many of those end their pregnancies, although she won't give exact figures. The emails are heartbreaking: "I'm far the loneliest I've ever been," a woman from Nairobi says. "I'm not a monster, I just can't have this baby." One of Gomperts's staff coaches her via email through a bad 24 hours of induced miscarriage: fever, sickness, pain.

When I ask Gomperts if she gets emails from the UK, I'm surprised when she says, "Well, do you mean Northern Ireland? Because of course abortion is still illegal there. We get a lot of emails from there."

I'm embarrassed to say I didn't know this, but it's true. Northern Ireland is not covered by Britain's 1967 Abortion Act; every year more than 1,000 Northern Irish women travel to the UK. What about the rest of Britain?

"Yes, we get them all the time. We had an Islamic girl forbidden from leaving the house without a chaperone. How is she going to get to an abortion clinic? She can't. For her, her only option might be that she could get the medicine sent to her by

post. We have British women in abusive relationships, whose boyfriend will beat the hell out of her if he finds out she is pregnant and wants an abortion. Now, that's in a country where abortion is legal."

On her first trip to Ireland, Gomperts was asked if she had had an abortion and she refused to answer. But a few years later, when her boat docked in Portugal, tailed by a Portuguese warship, she went on a live TV chat show to face down detractors. Once Gomperts had the microphone, she hijacked it, giving straight to camera a very clear recipe for a DIY medical abortion. Her studio host and the nation were stunned. Just when you thought Gomperts couldn't be any more fearless, she also announced she had had an abortion in the past, and was currently pregnant.

"The plan was to tell women in Portugal how to do an abortion by themselves. No one had done that before. I didn't actually know I was going to say the rest of it, but I think now it's important for women who can be open about how common abortion is."

She's no extremist. When I probe her as to her views on later-term abortions, she's says that most countries set limits at viability (ie, about 22 to 24 weeks) and that "makes sense — viability is a philosophically good border". But she's relieved her work is in early abortions. "I'm happy I'm not in the position to make decisions like that."

What if pregnancy happened to men rather than women, how would that change the abortion laws? "I think if men could get pregnant there wouldn't be any abortion laws." vesselthefilm.com; the film is showing at the Leeds International Film Festival on Nov 8

Rebecca Gomperts and, left, docking in Spain



If Oscar Pistorius thinks the prison hospital is bad ...

Yesterday, Oscar Pistorius was sentenced to five years in the notorious Kgosi Mampuru II prison, formerly known as Pretoria Central Prison, for killing his girlfriend. Much of the time he serves may be spent on the hospital wing. Were he going as a regular inmate, things would be very different, says another disabled man who has experienced South Africa's prison system first hand. Ronnie Fakude, a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair, spent 28 months on remand for fraud, in a prison in Bloemfontein. Unlike Pistorius, he is poor and black.

Fakude — yet to be convicted of a crime — spent over two years in conditions he calls "a torture chamber". He shared a cell designed for 32 inmates with 87 other people. Prisoners were woken at 4am; if they were lucky, they showered (there was one bath and one shower). At 8am they were counted and given breakfast: porridge with a small amount of milk, and tea. Fakude was supposed to be on a special, court-ordered diet suitable for paraplegics, but claims it never materialised.

And, he says, though the authorities state that prisoners are given three meals a day, they don't say that you have to eat them in a four-hour window. And rations were scarce. "You get hungry within seconds," he says. "At 11 o'clock you get your full meal — porridge and eggs. Maybe some beetroot. Then at 2pm the warders lock you up until the following day. If there is a good football match on TV, they'll lock you up earlier because they want to watch it. Sometimes, it's because they're going for their own meals. Or they'll lock you up for the whole day, just because someone in another section has had a fight."

The library was frequently closed, so books were scarce, and there was no TV for inmates. "They said you have to buy it if you want it. I couldn't afford to buy myself a piece of soap, how could I afford a TV?"

Fakude says that during his time on remand he contracted TB and was bullied by other inmates for his disability. "No prison in South Africa can cater for any disabled person, or with anything other than physically able inmates. The facilities are not built to accommodate people with disabilities."

Eventually, Carolyn Raphaely of the Wits Justice Project, which investigates miscarriages of justice and the conditions of inmates in South African jails, heard of his plight. After a sustained campaign, Fakude was eventually released on licence. At home in Johannesburg, he is still awaiting trial. Hilary Rose