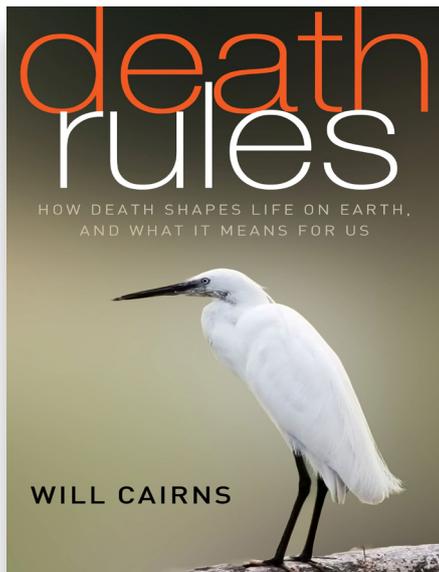


## BOOK REVIEW

# DEATH RULES: HOW DEATH SHAPES LIFE ON EARTH, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR US

WITH ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR WILL CAIRNS LOCKED IN FOR THE 2016 JUNIOR DOCTOR CONFERENCE, WE ASKED AMA QUEENSLAND COUNCIL OF DOCTORS IN TRAINING CHAIR DR MALCOLM FORBES TO REVIEW HIS BOOK, *DEATH RULES: HOW DEATH SHAPES LIFE ON EARTH, AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR US*.



Associate Professor Will Cairns  
Vivid Publishing  
e-book \$9.99 US (\$14AUS)

“Cairns introduces the book by imploring us to wrangle free from our cultural and religious constraints to contemplate death in a scientifically objective and brutally honest manner.”

Associate Professor Will Cairns is Director of the Townsville Palliative Care Service. His book *Death Rules* is an illuminating and accessible work that explores the concept of death through a naturalistic prism, challenging us to confront our views about life and death.

Cairns introduces the book by imploring us to wrangle free from the constraints of our cultural and religious baggage to contemplate death in a scientifically objective and brutally honest manner.

What follows is an eloquent description of the biology of death and dying, an analysis of how humans die and how we cope with the death of others and finally, informed speculation on how humans may die in the future.

The book begins and ends with a narrative describing Raine Island, a remote and uninhabited island off the coast of North Queensland. Cairns utilises vignettes of the flora and fauna on this island – a microcosm of the dynamic and fragile ecosystem of Earth – to demonstrate that death is a driver of evolution and a necessity for the propagation of life.

Cairns explains complex scientific concepts with clarity, informed by a solid comprehension of evolutionary and molecular biology. These explanations are pleasantly interspersed by personal anecdotes from a long and remarkable career in medicine.

In the latter third of the book, the relationship between modern society and death is considered. In the past 13 years, the Queensland Health Budget has increased 235 per cent. Health costs will increase as our demographic structure slowly transforms

into inverted triangle with our aging population. While lauding the achievements of modern medical technology, Cairns bemoans the culture of life prolongation at all costs, especially with treatment that offers a low likelihood of benefit and denies patients the opportunity to deal with their impending death with dignity and grace.

This chapter resonated strongly with me and invoked memories of a patient I consulted in ICU as a gastroenterology basic trainee. This hapless man was ventilated, had unrecordable platelets, and was bleeding from the bowel. He had terminal blood cancer. Despite the patent futility of further treatment, he remained on chemotherapy and the haematology team had requested we review him to consider a gastroscopy.

As doctors, with our knowledge of the limitations of modern medicine, many of us would eschew life-prolonging treatments with significant side effects and limited benefit if we had a terminal illness. However, this is often not the case for our patients. Greater efforts must be made to assist our patients in making truly informed decisions. This book, in addressing how we philosophically approach death as individuals and as a society, is an important tool in these efforts.

As Cairns aptly states – death, for all of us, is natural, normal, and inevitable. We only have a finite period of time on this earth. This book, in reminding us of our mortality, offers an opportunity for us to reconsider how we spend our limited years. When we die, we all want to experience a peaceful death. More doctors reading this book will help the profession achieve that aim for our patients. **Q**

## Associate Professor Will Cairns

Associate Professor Will Cairns is Director of the Townsville Palliative Care Service. His father is a scientist and Will was raised in a household of open and enthusiastic scientific discussion. He spent much of his early childhood in Australia before his family moved in 1963 to Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory on Long Island in the USA. After graduating from Brown University in 1971, he attended medical school in London before moving with his young family in 1978 to Townsville in tropical Queensland. In 2010 he was awarded an OAM for his leadership in the development of palliative care services in Townsville and the creation of the specialty of Palliative Medicine in Australia.

**Catch Associate Professor Cairns at the Third Annual Junior Doctor Conference in Brisbane on 25-26 June 2016.**