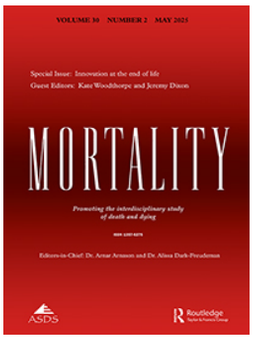

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Editorial: Innovation at the end of life

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It is an exciting time to be working in death studies. With more generations living simultaneously than any time in human history, there is an ever-growing awareness of mortality. Death during old age is increasingly the dominant form of death around the world, placing ever more pressure on families and services to support ageing and dying amongst individuals (see for example Teggi, 2018). The recent COVID pandemic and growing climate concerns have also brought with them a renewed focus on loss, both human and environmental, physical and virtual. Around the world rituals and expectations around dying, death and its aftermath are changing as a result of multifarious factors, including individualism, commercialisation, secularism, materialism, neo-liberalism and more (Walter, 2020).

As Doughty and Troyer noted at the conference from which this special issue originates (2023), much of what is happening now maintains well established debates about agency and control, institutionalisation, and so on. What *is* new is the scale of these challenges. This special issue sets out some of these novel and emergent issues, both human and planetary, organised around the theme of 'Innovation at the end of life'. Innovation is a recurrent driver in policy, environmental discourse, health, and public services. Put simply, innovation can be something new (a policy, product, service, practice or organisational change) or an existing intervention or idea applied in a new setting. It may represent a radical departure from existing practice (rare events which transform societal paradigms of production) or smaller incremental or discontinuous levels of change, which builds upon existing skills or needs (Osborne and Brown, 2013).

Much attention has been given to the way in which innovation might help address social needs (OECD, 2010; Santoro, Ferraris, & Vrontis, 2018) or improve healthcare and health outcomes across the lifecourse (World Health Organization, n.d.). Much less attention has been paid to how innovation might be generated, implemented and utilised at the end of life, in deathcare practices, or in theories about death and loss. Of the work that existed prior to this special issue, innovation has been predominantly considered through mapping change in the hospice movement and the funeral industry (Abel, 1986; Beard & Burger, 2017), the arrival and growth of 'digital death' (Moncur, 2016), and the development of public health approaches to the end of life and bereavement (Aoun et al, 2018). It was also applied to the effects of technological invention on ageing and death (Bishop, 2019). Yet there is so much more to be said about the potential for innovation and death, dying, and loss, and many of these issues became apparent during the COVID pandemic between 2020 and 2022. It highlighted the need for governments around the world to

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plan for death and ensure capacity in infrastructure; the importance of equitable access and resource for health and social support at the end of life; the criticality of appropriate communication about death and dying; and the emotional needs and care of professionals and families (see Entress, Tyler, Zavattaro, & Sadiq, 2020).

The articles in this special issue chart a growing recognition that death and loss need to conceptualised *beyond* the human. Such an understanding of more-than-human loss (*see* Harris, this issue) needs to reflect deaths from conflict, war, famine, and land loss, and a loss of trust, faith and confidence in authority and political power. A more expansive theorisation of death requires critique and interrogation, not least in recognising the extent to which death is a profoundly relational, rather than an individual experience (see Walter, 2025). Existing theories about dying, bereavement and grief also need to be acknowledged for what they are: a product of predominantly white, post-industrial, affluent cultures (Stedmon et al, 2025).

Evidently, there is so much to explore, and the diversification of views and voices is critical to the future survival and growth of the study of death and dying. Through this special issue on innovative and nascent topics, trends and issues, we hope to have contributed to this diversity. It stems from the 2023 Centre for Death and Society Annual Conference, which was based on the theme of Innovation at the End of Life. The University of Bath's Centre for Death and Society (CDAS) was founded in 2005 by Glennys Howarth and this issue of *Mortality* marks its 20th anniversary.

The origins of CDAS

The Centre was established as a response to the growth in momentum in death studies in the 1990s. In 1992, Howarth and Peter Jupp (interviewed in this journal by Holloway in 2019) organised the first Death, Dying and Disposal Conference (DDD). Held at the University of Oxford, it was a great success and building on this emergent momentum Howarth and Jupp went on to establish this very journal in 1995.

The Centre for Death and Society was officially launched at the University of Bath in 2005. In building the centre, Howarth's intention was to create a forum that enabled people to connect and share their work. She also hoped to encourage communication, research and practice across disciplinary boundaries. Once established, the work of the Centre was placed on a firm footing by the recruitment of three eminent professors in the field—Allan Kellehear, Tony Walter and Malcolm Johnson. Together with Howarth, researcher Una MacConville, PhD students Christine Valentine and Beatrice Godwin, and Centre Manager Caron Staley formed the first core staff of CDAS. Two DDD conferences followed, in 2005 and 2007, the latter jointly hosted with the University's Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts. Around the same time, a Foundation Degree in Funeral Services was established, funded by sponsorship from the National Association of Funeral Directors. Alongside a Masters in Death and Society led by Walter, the Centre was up and running with an ambitious education and research agenda which brought together practitioners and academics interested and working in the field of the end of life and beyond. These two teaching programmes expanded the team, with visiting teaching and research fellows, project and course administrators joining the programmes. By 2010, the reputation and progress made by the Centre was palpable, with the CDAS webpage having amassed almost half a million visits.

Within the early years of the centre *Mortality* and the DDD Conference were both hosted and organised by CDAS. Recognising the importance of continued growth and diversification for the journal and the DDD conference, members of CDAS came together with other esteemed UK-based academics in 2009 to form the Association of the Study of Death and Society (ASDS). This newly formed Association moved the intellectual stewardship of *Mortality* and the DDD conference, allowing CDAS to focus on its research and teaching agenda.

CDAS continued to grow in this period, with the addition of full-time academics Paula Smith, John Troyer, Kate Woodthorpe, Jeremy Dixon, Hannah Rumble and newly graduated PhD student Christine Valentine as research fellows. The CDAS conference was introduced by Walter in 2010, followed by Troyer's introduction of the CDAS In Conversation series in 2021. During the pandemic much of the centre's activities moved online and have been so successful that they remained that way ever since. Being online maximises international reach and accessibility, which remain at the foundations of CDAS's activities to this day.

Alongside an active events calendar, research has remained a priority for the centre. Multiple successful research applications from public funders and commercial organisations have included Valentine and Templeton's work on dying from alcohol and substance use (2017), Woodthorpe and Rumble's work on funeral costs and practice (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016; Woodthorpe et al, 2022); Templeton and Rumble's work on coronial processes and inquests (see Jacobsen, 2024), and Pendle's research on famine (2023). The centre has been joined by emerging talents, most recently Sam Carr, Naomi Pendle and Diana Teggi, and CDAS currently has more PhD students than at any time in its history – many of whom have contributed to editing this special issue and this editorial.

Alongside core staff and doctoral students, at the time of writing the centre has 32 visiting fellows and professors from around the world, and is physically visited by scholars and students every year. We estimate that over 20 years 200 issues of the newsletter have been received by over 2000 people every month; over 10,000 people have attended CDAS events; and core members have published over 100 peer reviewed papers and books. To mark the centre's 20th anniversary we have created a list of 20 of our most prominent publications, written by academics when they were at CDAS. This is available here.

In sum, CDAS has been and continues to be a thriving research and education centre, committed to developing the international field death studies in a wide range of contexts and disciplines. This special issue celebrates the Centre's success and looks to the future of the field. We hope you enjoy it.

This special issue

Seeing the 20th anniversary approaching, in late 2022 then CDAS Directors Woodthorpe and Dixon proposed this special issue to the Mortality Editorial Board, to utilise the centre's upcoming 2023 annual conference on Innovation at the End of Life to review and solicit potential papers. The keynote speakers for the conference, Professors Darcy Harris and Ruth Penfold-Mounce, were invited to contribute to the special issue, before an open call was circulated for papers. We received three times as many abstracts as could be included and we sought to select papers that explicitly addressed the theme of innovation, were from around the world, and from authors at different careers stages.

Providing an opportunity to support and develop the next generation of death studies academics was core to the bid for this special issue, and once we knew our application to edit this issue was successful we advertised to and recruited from our PhD and visiting fellow community, along with the wider CDAS community, to create an editorial board. All members of the editorial board received training on reviewing and were involved with peer-reviewing papers. We purposefully sought to allocate less experienced reviewers with those more experienced, to provide something of a 'training ground' for the editorial board. The special issue editors oversaw this whole process, and all members of the special issue editorial board have contributed to this editorial paper.

The result is an eclectic array of papers covering a wide range of topics from several different disciplines. The special issue opens with a Nowaczk-Basinka's paper (2025) on the development of a new professional group of innovators; what she calls 'digital afterlife leaders'. Within this, Nowaczk-Basinka outlines four areas of expertise for this new professional cohort, and the processes through which they will establish their professional identity and credentials over the next few years. Moving from the digital to the colonising of knowledge, in the second paper Antonia Nannyonga-Tamusuza et al (2025) make a persuasive case to recognise the limitations of highly individualised and western ontologies around death and dying and address the impact of Western universalising claims to knowledge. In their highly innovative paper on exploring – and amplifying - experience and understanding from the African continent, their intention "is to challenge and deconstruct the authoritative superiority of Eurocentris and Anglophone 'knowledge', and its ontological underpinnings… [and show that] 'Africa'… needs to be understood as a plurality of peoples and experiences of colonialism and neo-colonialism, cultural practices and meanings, in constant flux and change" (page).

The third paper in this issue comes from France, exploring the introduction of tree burials as an innovative memorial practice that highlights tensions between the social, the environmental and the legal (Fruiquiere, 2025). Fruiquiere explores the development of memorial landscapes, specifically those in natural settings, what is permitted in those landscapes and how they are governed. Arguing that innovation in these sites and in memorialising practices has been permitted by gaps in relatively old funeral legislation in France, Fruiquiere's paper shows the significance in the interconnection of social change with legislation that enables innovative practice to emerge.

The fourth paper by Gilmour and Steffan (2025) takes us to living with dementia and facing the end of life, and the impact of this on dementia caregivers. Exploring the use of letter writing as a technique, the paper details the complexity of emotion that dementia caregivers can experience, and the usefulness of writing letters to explore 'rediscovery' and 'forgiveness'. They argue that the evidence from their study indicates that letter writing is a potentially innovative intervention to address pre-death grief experiences for this group of people.

Continuing the theme of care, the fifth paper moves to India and the provision of care for older people reaching the end of their lives. Here, Panchadhyayi (2025), explores the world of *ayahs*, who are paid caregivers for older people (and children) in West Bengal, and – who the author asserts - are "frontline care actors, important stakeholders and critical knowledge producers in… shaping practises for end-of-life care for 'ageing in place'" (page). In exploring this group of caregivers and their practices, Panchadhyayi

makes a powerful case for the importance of voices and experiences from the Global South in academic studies of death and dying. She argues that the Global South is more than a matter of geography and instead needs to be understood as a "practice to restructure global networks of power and facilitate liminality, a critical orientation to highlight the subjectivities of the marginalized and take a stand against the pervasive objectification of the oppressed" (page).

Moving away from the impact of the end of life on individuals, the following paper by conference keynote Harris (2025) develops her presentation to explore sociopolitical grief, a novel and innovative concept that Harris identifies as losses resulting from the implementation of policy, law, organisational norms and broader social messaging. A wide ranging and provocative paper, Harris encourages the reader to think about losses associated with climate change, health care funding, and the treatment of indigenous peoples arguing that "Grief occurs when the assumptive world is shattered, resulting in the loss of a sense of coherence and meaning… sociopolitical grief is unique in that the origin of the loss extends from overarching social and political structures, but the impact can be deeply personal and painful" (Page). A key outcome of this grief, she goes on to conclude, is division and polarisation in families, communities and governments.

Continuing the discussion of theory, the following paper by Walter (2025) explores the challenges posed when assumptive worlds are shattered, and how Rosa's sociological theories of resonance and alienation provide a framework for understanding loss in people's relationship(s) with the material and social worlds. Here, he argues that "resonance and alienation as forms of relationship to a changing world can… illuminate the dying person's experience of looking out at, relating to, their changing world. This complements the psychological / therapeutic gaze that looks in at emotions…" (page XX, original emphasis). In a similarly provocative manner, Hamilton et al's following paper (2025) is unconventional in approach and structure. Recognising it themselves as an 'unruly article' the authors reflect on what decolonisation means for death, dying and their aftermath and question whether they could write such an article for "an academic journal embedded in white institutions in affluent Anglophone and Eurocentric higher education historical traditions" (page). By virtue of the paper's inclusion in this special issue we trust the answer is yes, and in so doing we recognise the risks the authors took in submitting such an unconventionally structured paper.

Completing the more theoretical papers in this issue, Stedmon et al (2025) undertake a vital critique of bereavement theory and practice, inviting "readers to engage in an exploration of what it might mean and what threads might need pulling apart" (page XX). Innovative in both its evaluation of knowledge production and expertise, and the inclusion of firsthand author accounts of their experience in the latter pages, Stedmon et al argue that UK based bereavement support services have uncritically adopted a focus on the needs of individuals, and ask whether services have focused on 'inclusivity' to the exclusion of questions about the extent to which theories underpinning such services are embedded in coloniality and modernity. This is a paper that needs to be widely read within the death studies community and will be, we anticipate, a classic in years to come.

Continuing the focus on bereavement support, Cook's paper (2025) explores bereaved people's needs when engaging with grief services online, exploring the flexibility that the digital world provides, particularly when an individual is feeling overwhelmed. Arguing that digital interventions need to be developed with input from bereaved people

themselves, Cook's paper builds on previous work on death and the digital to argue that a user-centred approach to grief support is required in digital design from the outset.

Our second keynote from the 2023 CDAS Conference, Penfold-Mounce (2025) shares her reflections on walking as a learning tool in next paper, in the creation of the York Death and Culture Walk (DaCWalk), an open access, self-guided and fully podcasted walk around the ancient walled city of York, UK. Embedded in undergraduate teaching and assessment, Penfold-Mounce details the function, scope and purpose of the walk, along with the intended and unintended (fortuitous) consequences. Readers may be interested to know that, to mark the centre's 20th anniversary and with Penfold-Mounce's leadership, CDAS has created its own comparable walk around the city of Bath, UK, where the centre is based.

Our final two conventional papers in this issue build on the creativity of walking pedagogy to engage with and explore playful themes and topics, metaphorically and literally. Zheng et al (2025) encourage readers to consider the credibility and authority of children's reflections on death and – similar to Stedmon et al - challenges the wider death studies community to consider the rational philosophical and empirical underpinnings and assumptions of the field. Phewan et al (2025) encourage a similar playfulness in their paper, by examining the use of games in death education in Thailand and as mechanism to promote engagement with preparing for the end of life. Their findings suggest that games are a resource and time cost effective approach for participants and as a means to train health care professionals who deal with Advanced Care Planning.

The special issue ends with a stimulating, personal and highly engaging interview by Francis with scholars Fletcher and Maxwell (Francis et al, 2025). In their interview, the three women reflect on knowledge production, the importance of and need for inter-disciplinarity, the role of the personal in academic study and the need to restructure death studies to incorporate the voices of historically marginalised groups. Given the content and arguments outlined already, we could not have asked for a better way to end our special issue, from the future leaders of the field.

Thank you to all our authors for their contribution to this special issue, to the reviewers who volunteered their time to read and comment on earlier drafts papers, and to the editorial team for their support and input. Particular thanks go to Bethan Michael-Fox for her astute and responsive approach throughout the production process, and to the editors in chief and editorial board of Mortality for entrusting us with the 2025 special issue. We hope that readers will find this special issue an engaging and stimulating read, and we hope to see you are an upcoming CDAS event soon. To find out more about the centre, please look us up on: https://www.bath.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-for-death-society/.

Kate Woodthorpe, Jeremy Dixon, Mat Crawley, Alastair Comery, Chenyang Guo, Polly Maxwell, Tal Morse, Tamarin Norwood, Jana Rek (née Králová), and Diana Teggi, with Glennys Howarth and Caron Staley.

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