

MEDIA RELEASE

VITAL SIGNS

Stories from Intensive Care

Professor Ken Hillman

Published by UNSW Press/ Publication 2 November 2009/
RRP \$32.95 / ISBN 978 1 7422 3095 5

"Hillman presents an undiluted portal that allows the reader to view life and death from behind the hospital curtain." – Professor Mohamed Khadra, author of *The Patient* and *Making the Cut*

"These beautiful and profoundly humane stories invite us into the unique world of the intensive care, where the rawest and deepest of emotions meet the highest level of technology." – Intensive Care specialist Professor Rinaldo Bellomo



Up to 70 per cent of Australians now die in hospitals. Intensive care units, originally established to temporarily sustain life as patients recovered from serious illness or injury, have increasingly become the place where many of us will spend our last days.

In *Vital Signs* Intensive Care specialist Professor Ken Hillman brings together a compassionate collection of stories about the experiences of intensive care patients, their families and carers as they cope with matters of life and death.

Since the 1950s hospitals – and in tandem, their Intensive Care Units (ICU) – have become the lynchpin of medical management. According to Professor Hillman, patients were once treated at home by their doctor, and death was put down to the inevitability of life's natural course. Today, however, rapid technological and drug treatment developments have increasingly pushed patients into the hospital system. He argues that the media, governments and a culture which embraces advances in medicine, creates the impression that almost everyone that is wheeled into the emergency department can be 'saved.'

Vital Signs, with its collection of stories inspired by Professor Hillman's real life encounters with patients, **offers readers a journey through the reality of ICU** and all its attendant joy, suffering and tragedy.

It also offers **a searing critique of the way modern healthcare can fail those in greatest need.**

With his unique insider perspective, some of the many contentious topics Professor Hillman explores include:

- The consequences of the **health industry taking over the dying process** and the often cruel treatment of the elderly, coming to a natural end-of-life
- The emotional and financial costs to patients, families and society in general of keeping people alive for a few additional weeks or days on advanced life support

Media interviews and author/cover images:

Louise Cornegé | 02 8904 0822 | louise@tjc.com.au, 0422 162 467 | www.tjc.com.au

- The **disparities in the funding received** for ICU's compared with other medical services
- The **unreal expectations placed on modern medicine**, including the effectiveness of so-called "modern miracles" such as CPR
- Issues of autonomy and patient's rights when it comes to the dying process
- The fears of criminal charges and litigation by ICU specialists if they are seen to not actively "save" a life, even when death is inevitable

With startling honesty, Hillman says that "it is often easier to let patients lie around the ICU for a few days or even weeks and allow them to develop inevitable complications such as pneumonia, so they then die of natural causes, than it is to confront the imminence of the patient's death and communicate with the patient or their family about it."

Amidst the sadness of personal stories, *Vital Signs* also brims with humour, revealing the very human experiences of the seriously ill and the dying. There are miraculous saves, as well as loving and dignified ends, and Ken's stories are imbued with innate empathy for the staff, patients and families who pass through the ICU.

Appealing to anyone concerned with how medicine has taken control of the dying process, *Vital Signs* will, most importantly, **provide a better understanding of ICU realities to those patients, friends and families facing end-of-life decisions.**

About the Author

Professor Ken Hillman is a professor of intensive care at the University of New South Wales in Sydney. He was the first doctor in Australia to become formally qualified as an intensive care specialist and is recognised internationally as a leading figure in the field. Professor Hillman developed the concept of the medical emergency team, a revolutionary concept that has helped save lives in hospitals the world over. He is the co-author of the widely used textbook, *Clinical Intensive Care* and is the director of the Simpson Centre for Health Services Research.



Media interviews and author/cover images:

Louise Cornegé | 02 8904 0822 | louise@tjc.com.au, 0422 162 467 | www.tjc.com.au

tjc ~ to join creatively

Suite 101, 55 Lavender St Milsons Point NSW 2061 Australia

p +61 2 8904 0822 f +61 2 8904 0932 tjc.com.au