Since the 1968 report from the Harvard "Ad Hoc Committee on Brain Death and Irreversible Coma", the concept and diagnosis of brain death has been an essential component in organ transplantation. The criteria for the diagnosis of brain death have been laid out by the American Academy of Neurology, and the concept has been both supported and disputed in the medical literature, the lay press, and in Presidential Commissions and Councils on Bioethics. It has been described as a concept "at once Well-Settled, and Persistently Unresolved." We will examine the genesis of the concept of brain death, its current application, and the controversies that it has engendered.