Protecting society from the dangers of euthanasia

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Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves - Proverbs 31:8



Thomas Sydenham

The historic role of medical practice

Western medical practice historically upheld the sanctity of innocent human life, based on a biblical recognition of God's image in mankind:

> *"Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man"* (Genesis 9:6).

This enabled Western doctors to accept the ideal *Primum non nocere* - "First, do no harm" - and to take the *Hippocratic Oath* (wrongly attributed to Hippocrates) as introduced to Western medical practice by the "Father of English Medicine" - Thomas Sydenham (1624-1689) - which stated in part:

> *I will follow that method of treatment which, according to my ability and judgement, I consider for the benefit of my patients, and abstain from whatever is deleterious and mischievous. I will give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel; furthermore, I will not give to a woman a pessary to produce abortion.*

But from the mid-1900s some medical people inverted their historic role. Refusing to serve only as agents of healing, they began providing two radical responses (sometimes legally, but generally contrary to the law) - namely: **voluntary euthanasia** - the deliberate killing of a consenting patient; and **physician-assisted suicide** - the suicide of a patient, with a doctor's help.

These must not be confused with the unintended fatal result of medication (including pain-relief) nor with removal of life-support (so nature may take its course) when there is no motive to kill. But allowing medical people to deliberately kill (with patient consent) can only increase the incidence of **involuntary euthanasia** - the wilful killing of a patient without consent.

Euthanasia and the suffering individual

Euthanasia is often justified on the basis of helping suffering individuals. In fact a patient experiences great pain only when not receiving adequate medication. In modern hospitals, most pain can be managed, though many doctors are not trained in palliative care.

In rare cases of extreme suffering, it may be that sufficient medication to relieve pain would have the accidental and unintended effect of ending a patient's life. In such situations the motive is not to kill, but to relieve pain. Such action is not a deliberate ending of the patient's life, and is therefore morally justified. So there is simply no medical justification for euthanasia on the basis of alleged inability to relieve pain.

Further, doctors do not know when a person's natural death will occur, as (naturally) *no one has power over the day of his death* (Ecclesiastes 8:8). Since that knowledge belongs only to God, there are many examples of patients who have been told they are dying, who have made a partial or complete recovery (by natural, medical or miraculous means). It would be tragic to undergo euthanasia based on faulty medical opinion.

The impact of euthanasia on wider society

Legal euthanasia increases the danger to old, infirm or vulnerable people:

- In Holland in 1998 it was reported that over 10,000 people were carrying cards that state "Don't kill me, doctor" as they feared being murdered in hospital (UK *Sunday Telegraph* 18/10/1998) since euthanasia without consent occurs as the principle of killing is accepted, especially with the increased demands on healthcare.

- In the Northern Territory, depression affected four of the seven people who chose a lethal injection under the 1996 *Rights of the Terminally Ill Act* (overturned in 1997). The four did not make their decision because they were in pain, but from fear of being a burden, being worthless and socially isolated (*The Lancet* 3/10/1998). This shows how legal euthanasia is a danger to depressed persons.

- In Holland in 2005 several senior doctors admitted killing newborn babies (*The Advertiser* 8/3/2005 p27) who were deemed unworthy of life by staff whose social values have been undermined by the law.

The inability to control legal euthanasia

It is not possible to formulate laws to govern euthanasia. This is because laws that should function to punish offenders can only be enforced when witnesses lay charges and testify in court. The private nature of healthcare tends to preclude any witness of an illegal offer (or act) to deliberately end a life. This minimises the possibility of successful prosecution. Further, the dying person or family are in no position to press charges. The only way to protect the vulnerable is to have laws that curb corruption, and which uphold the sanctity of human life. But legal euthanasia undermines the law that should protect people, and it encourages corruption.

Loss of legal effectiveness

When the principle of "first, do no harm" is breached, social thinking changes, and laws designed to protect life become irrelevant. So in 1999 a doctor in the Netherlands was charged with the crime of illegally assisting the suicide of a patient who was not terminally sick (nor ill at all). The patient was in very healthy condition, but was "tired of living" and asked for (and received) a lethal injection. That doctor was prosecuted by the authorities but was eventually acquitted (*The Advertiser* 16/12/2000 p66).

Laws may have impressive safeguards and penalties that remain largely unenforced, as people become desensitised and apathetic. This has been the case with abortion, that became effectively available on demand in many nations - while technically remaining a criminal offence!

Unlawful conduct in the medical profession

While most doctors are scrupulous and honourable, some have acted unlawfully towards the terminally ill. A report in the *Medical Journal of Australia* (175:2001) found over one-third of surgeons in the study admitted giving high doses of pain-killers intended to hasten the patient's death. Further, 56% of these doctors had received no clear request for euthanasia from their patients.

After Holland legalised euthanasia, the government's *Remmelink Report* (published in 1991) found (for 1990) that 8,100 people had died from pain-relieving drugs given with the intent to hasten death, and in 61% of these cases no consent was given. Clearly the problem of corrupt action toward the dying is not solved by legalising euthanasia, but it may grow as a result, since illegal conduct is most effectively hidden among lawful activities.

The burden of legalised euthanasia

Legalised euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide can only increase the burden faced by the dying and their loved ones. It is not difficult to imagine heated quarrels arising when a dying person asks the family to help decide between a quick, cheap injection and a slower, expensive palliation. Or the dying person may try to shield the family from soul-searching or disputation, by opting for a sudden demise. But quick death prevents families expressing grief, achieving reconciliation, saying farewell, and resolving unfinished issues, whereas unhurried death enables better closure.

Moreover, unhurried death can provide opportunity for the dying to heed a challenge given by God - leading to divine reconciliation - in accord with biblical teaching that sickness can encourage repentance:

> *... a man may be chastened on a bed of pain,*
> *with constant distress in his bones ....*
> *He prays to God and finds favour with him ....* (Job 33:19, 26).

Un-hastened end of life also enables family members to observe the death of their loved one, and thereby prepare themselves for this eventuality.

A Christian civic response

Christians have largely been complacent about attacks on the sanctity of life, and have failed to speak up, or take action, though the Scriptures urge:

> *... rescue those being led away to death;*
> *hold back those staggering towards slaughter ...* (Proverbs 24:11).

Our challenge is to educate a world that has not understood the consequences of legal euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide, nor comprehended how such actions can only endanger the vulnerable. Recognising the Christian responsibility to influence governmental policy and social thinking, the people of God may especially uphold the sanctity of all human life, and may seek to guide the nation away from the various attacks on the dignity and value of each human being.

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