

# Euthanasia

**Social Issues & Resources Committee**



## Introduction

It's just a bleak fact that pain, suffering, distress and death itself are inevitable parts of human life. Even if we happen to escape serious illness or injury during our lives we will always know someone who will have to endure many of the evils we fear the most. And it is just self evident that suffering is evil. As Christians we believe that it has come into the order of our world because of human disobedience and rejection of what God designed us to be. So we are bound to support every effort that is made to reduce pain and enable healing. Christians also believe that God can transform suffering for his own good ends but that does not take away from the basic evil of pain, disease and injury in human lives.

Nowadays we understand the workings of our human bodies and even our minds better than at any previous stage of history. We can use drugs and surgery in ways beyond the imagination of our ancestors. But there are limits as to what we can achieve. There are many diseases that we can only control rather than cure and people are still condemned to suffer conditions of distress and humiliation in spite of the best efforts of our medical technology. Above all, advances in medicine can only serve to delay the grim prospect of death that we all face.

Again, Christians will agree that compassion for our fellow human beings means we have the duty to help them die in as comfortable and peaceful ways as we can. We also believe that death is not disaster for those who have committed their lives to Christ. Dying in faith means going to be with him and it is right that we should welcome the release of death for those whose quality of life has been reduced to a daily grind of suffering or infirmity.

However, there is a significant number of people who argue that we should go further than simply give care and attempt to relieve pain. They believe that there are situations when we should actively take steps to end the life of the person who is suffering on the grounds that life has become too unbearable to continue. If they are right, then we have a duty to kill, or, at least, help bring about the death of people who suffer in this way and wish to end their lives.

## The current debate

Any compassionate person must have sympathy with someone who longs to die before succumbing to the harrowing indignities of advanced Alzheimer's disease or the awful degeneration of motor neurone disease. We will have seen powerful cases presented on TV and in the newspapers urging us to agree that these people should actively be helped to die. Many of us will be familiar with the situations in countries like the Netherlands where the state has made

provision for the medical profession to arrange the deaths of people considered to have an unendurably low quality of life.

## What is Euthanasia?

'Euthanasia' is the term traditionally used for ending lives to spare people from further suffering. The word comes from a Greek expression literally meaning 'good' or 'easy' death. Of course Christian compassion gives us the duty to ensure, as far as we can, that our fellow human beings pass from this life in as comfortable and peaceful a way as possible. However, as a Church, we share the convictions of the wider Christian community that the principle of intentionally causing death to avoid further suffering is morally wrong.

## Biblical Discussion

Let us begin from specifically Christian reasons. Although the Biblical commandment forbids us to kill there are exceptions to this in the Old Testament where provision is made for executing criminals and for killing in war. Given the teaching of Jesus and the emphasis of the New Testament message some Christians would argue that even these exceptions have no place within the Christian order. However, the Bible makes no provision for killing people in deep distress to save them from further misery. Instead, the way of Jesus Christ seems to imply a firm conviction that the timing of our deaths should be left to God. The Apostle Paul earnestly believed that for him to live was Christ and to die would be gain. (Philippians 1:21), that he would rather be absent from the body and present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8), but he was convinced that the decision was for God to make, not himself (Philippians 1:22-26). The fact is, we do not belong to ourselves, we have been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19,20). We can never really know what work God has to complete even in a person whose mind seems to be utterly confused or who is barely conscious because of sedation to relieve pain. We should be very reluctant to take upon ourselves what seems to be the prerogative of God in actively bringing human life to an end.

## Discussion of Issues

### 1. A difference of intention

Sometimes a person in the final stages of a terminal illness is suffering so much that the medication needed to deal with pain might well be enough, in itself, to kill the patient. Some people claim that for Christians to be consistent in applying the position outlined above they would have to leave the patient in distress. However, there is an important difference between doing something that is intended to end the life of the person concerned and taking an action which has a high probability of shortening the person's life but which is intended to deal with pain rather than cause death. Similarly, there are cases where the life of someone in the final stages of a terminal illness might be prolonged through various life support systems. Again, there is a difference between deciding that artificially delaying death in these circumstances is a pointless prolongation of suffering and taking intentional steps to end the patient's life.

### 2. We are all different

We need to remember that human beings are not like mass produced machines and that responses to medical treatment vary from person to person. Medical decisions cannot be made according to hard and fast rules and we have to rely on the informed judgement and experience of medical practitioners in what are often difficult individual cases.

## Christian Perspectives on Legislation

As Christians we must recognise that many people do not accept a moral position based on the Bible. We must also be aware that there are strong campaigns urging our governments to change the law so that relatives and friends can legally assist in the suicide of suffering people who want to die and so that the medical profession can legitimately end the lives of terminally ill patients. Although we appreciate the intention that all sorts of safeguards would be written into such a change in the law there are important reasons why we should resist the legalisation of euthanasia. We believe that these reasons operate from any moral viewpoint.

## Reasons for opposing legislation legalising euthanasia

### 1. A mind shift from healing to killing

If we concede that people have a right to die in certain circumstances it follows that society has a duty to provide the means for their death, if they cannot arrange it for themselves. This responsibility would pass to the medical profession. Doctors would be called upon to decide when the death of the patient would be appropriate, and, if they were not directly arranging the death themselves, they would have a duty to authorise others to help with, or administer the fatal procedure. Under the guise of compassion we would be introducing a drastic change to the values of our society and distorting the traditional role of medicine from its mission of healing and treating pain and discomfort. There is something dangerously wrong with a society that institutionalises the killing of any of its citizens for any reason apart from maintaining law and order;

### 2. Deciding when the unbearable is unbearable

There is also the insurmountable difficulty of defining how unbearable a person's life must be before the state agrees that euthanasia is appropriate. Just as we are all different in our abilities to cope with pain and indignity so what might be an unacceptable quality of life for one person could well be gratefully accepted by someone else. Perhaps we could simply rely on the wishes of the person concerned, but would our society really be content to arrange the death of people who simply considered that they were too old or too unhappy to live? How would society decide when reasons for requesting euthanasia were unacceptable? Would we slide from the permission to arrange the death of those who suffer the most to the acceptance of suicide as a lifestyle choice? It is hard to see how these questions could ever have a clear answer;

### 3. Unfair pressure on the sick and elderly

How would we avoid situations where people would feel under pressure to request that their lives should be ended? It is all too easy for a seriously ill or severely disabled person to think of themselves as a burden to family and society, or to feel they should follow the example of others in requesting euthanasia when, deep down, they might have much to live for. It would be better for such people if the option was simply not available;

## Non-voluntary Euthanasia

So far, we have thought only of voluntary euthanasia, when people can give consent, either at the time, or perhaps through a living will, if they have reached the stage where communication is impossible. The same feelings of compassion that form the basis for euthanasia would also suggest that people who have never, and could not now give their consent should also have their lives ended if their suffering is severe enough. Again, we have the problem of how we define suffering and quality of life and how to stop a slide towards the killing of those who cause more distress or inconvenience to the rest of society than to themselves.

## Conclusion

We believe Christians should urge government and society to adopt the other choices that are available for the alleviation of pain and suffering. Necessary resources should be given to support already successful research into pain relief. Facilities like the Hospice Movement should be encouraged. Above all, the Christian community should take the lead in showing the prayerful, dignified, respectful care which assures people that they are valued and loved, even in the midst of pain and helplessness.

## Some Questions to Consider:

1. Your friend has just been to a nursing home visiting a much loved elderly relative in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease. She is convinced that it is sheer cruelty to keep patients alive in such an appalling state and argues passionately that they should quietly be 'put to sleep'. How would you respond?
2. You have a close relative in extreme pain with arthritis and who suffers distressing side effects from pain killing drugs. He tells you he longs for death and repeatedly expresses the wish that the doctor could give him something to end his life. What would you say to him?
3. You have been told that you are in the early stages of Motor Neurone Disease. How would you plan for the future?
4. You discover that a friend who was in the terminal stages of cancer actually died through deliberately taking an overdose of the drugs she had been prescribed. How would you reflect on what she had done?



## Some Further Reading.

*New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, UCCF, 1995 (with Bibliographies)

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*On Dying Well* - an updated contribution to the euthanasia debate: Stuart Horner, Ed (Church House Publishing)





