

**Food for Thought Article: “To Be, or Not to Be, - that is the Question ~
Euthanasia and Voluntary Assisted Dying.”**



As Hamlet wrestled with this question of ‘to be or not to be’ (Act 3 scene 1), he was debating, in his own mind, whether to commit suicide or not. What were the pros and cons of killing himself, remembering that in Shakespeare’s day attempting to commit suicide (called ‘self-murder’ in those days) was declared illegal by the State and regarded as a mortal sin by the Church? This question, therefore, had serious moral implications, not only for Hamlet himself but also for Shakespeare’s sensitive Elizabethan audiences.

Still today, one of the ongoing debates in societies around the world, is whether laws should be passed, or existing laws changed, to make euthanasia and voluntary assisted dying legal. The language has changed, but not the issues.

Hamlet describes the dilemma precisely. Should he continue to suffer, or should he put himself to sleep and ‘end the heartache, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to?’

On the other hand, he asks himself, would death end his suffering, ‘who knows what dreams might come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil?’ And what about our conscience? Does it make ‘cowards of us all’?

It seems to me that the first place to begin in the debate is indeed the **language** we use.

There is a Chinese proverb which says: “The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name.” So, what exactly do we mean by ‘voluntary euthanasia’ and what does ‘voluntary assisted dying’ entail?

‘Voluntary euthanasia’ (‘euthanasia’ means ‘good death’) is where Doctors actively end the lives of people who ask them to do so. We could call it ‘medical killing’ or even ‘medical poisoning.’ Some would prefer the term ‘mercy killing.’ So, with ‘voluntary euthanasia,’ it is the Doctor who administers the fatal dose.

On the other hand, with 'voluntary assisted dying' the Doctor prescribes the fatal dose but it is the individual who wants to die who must ingest the poison for him/herself. We could call this 'medically assisted suicide.'

One of the procedures used is to give the person an antiemetic drug followed, about 30 minutes later, by a lethal overdose of powdered pentobarbital (a barbiturate) dissolved in a glass of water. If necessary, the drugs can be ingested through a straw. The person falls asleep within 3-5 minutes and death occurs 30-40 minutes later.

The main difference, therefore, between 'voluntary euthanasia' and 'voluntary assisted dying' is who performs the final, fatal, act. By whose hand does the individual die ~ the Doctor's or the person him/herself?

Those seeking 'voluntary assisted dying' may, in some cases, be allowed to take the lethal drugs away with them and use them at a time of their choosing. It has also been noted that of those who do take the drugs away with them, up to 30% never in fact take them.

The 'Campaign for Dignity in Dying' believe 'voluntary assisted dying' is for those adults who are terminally ill, mentally competent, and *only have six months or less to live*. It is only for those who face imminent death from an incurable disease, illness, or medical condition.

Having considered the debate around the language used, we must turn now to the argument around **compassion**.

Surely, the argument goes, we should be willing to show compassion and take the person out of their pain and suffering, thus putting them out of their misery. The reasoning is that when death is inevitable, suffering should not be.

However, this view, it seems to me, has a very limited view of what causes human pain and suffering. To be sure, there can be intense physical pain, but this kind of pain can and should be well managed today, given the effective pain killers that are available.

Much more 'painful' can be emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual pain. This kind of pain, largely resistant to drugs, is much more likely to be assuaged through talking therapies, listening, befriending, prayer, seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. Hamlet's intense pain was not physical in nature. It was primarily mental, emotional, and spiritual.

Dame Cicely Saunders, one of the pioneers of the Palliative Care and Hospice movement, used to say, 'You don't have to kill the patient to kill the pain.' Terminally ill people need help to live before they die. When people die well it can be a fruitful time in their lives.

A third consideration is that of **autonomy**. Surely, I have the right to choose when, where and how I die. It is my choice!

Dignitas, founded in 1998 at Forch (near Zurich) in Switzerland, is an organisation which facilitates 'voluntary assisted dying'. It describes itself as 'a militant self-determination, autonomy and dignity help-to-live and right-to-die association' which....'fights internationally for the last human right on a legal and political level.'

They believe that forcing people to travel abroad and pay thousands of pounds for a dignified death is cruel and wrong. They say that assisted dying allows a dying person to control their death if they decide their suffering is unbearable.

Paradoxically, 'voluntary euthanasia' is illegal in Switzerland and 'voluntary assisted dying' is only allowed if the '*motives are not selfish*.'

So, which way is the wind blowing on this debate internationally? There are a growing number of countries around the world where 'voluntary assisted dying' is legal and some countries where 'voluntary euthanasia' is legal. This applies to a growing number of States in America, and Australia, and New Zealand.

Some countries have laws that allow people who are not terminally ill to receive assistance to die e.g., Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg. In the Netherlands in 2017, there were 6,585 cases of voluntary euthanasia or voluntary assisted dying. This represents 4.4% of the total number of deaths.

(For the legal situation in your own country, see www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/ethics/end-of-life/physician-assisted-dying and click on 'The Law around the World.'

Some final questions: -

1. I would imagine that most Christians believe that our life is a gift from God and in the same way that we had no choice in being born, can we not leave the manner and timing of our death to Him? 'The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away,' says Job in the context of his sons and daughters dying. (Job 1:21). And Solomon concludes that it is God who sets 'a time to be born and a time to die'(Eccles. 3:1&2).

And has not the dying process been redeemed by God's grace and the death and resurrection of Christ?

Alternatively, Prof. Doctor Hans Kung, a Swiss Catholic theologian, believed that God gave humans responsibility for their entire lives. Therefore, in his view, one may also return this gift of life to the Creator at any time if it becomes too arduous. And two former Archbishops, George Carey, and Desmond Tutu, came out in favour of legalisation. [For a rebuttal of their arguments, see John Keown's piece on You Tube, 'Desmond Tutu, George Carey & Euthanasia'].

2. Here in the U.K., there are around 50 people or less each year who choose 'voluntary assisted dying' and travel to Switzerland. Should the law be changed here in the U.K. for this very small minority when it may put at risk the lives of the overwhelming majority (about 500,000 die every year in the U.K.)? Could it be that the freedom of the small minority to choose should be limited by the freedoms of others? If I am free to choose when to die what will be the impact on the rest of society?

Baroness Ilora Finlay of Llandaff has said: "We should not forget that laws are more than just regulatory instruments. They also send powerful social messages. An assisted dying law sends the subliminal message, however unintended by legislators, that if we are terminally ill, taking our own lives is something we should consider." (www.care.org.uk/cause/assisted-suicide)

Baroness Ilora is a Professor of Palliative Medicine, Britain being the only country in the world where palliative care is a recognised medical specialism.

3. Although countries who practice euthanasia and assisted dying have put in place procedures and safeguards, is there not a risk that the system might be abused and pressure put on older people, people with disabilities, and other vulnerable groups, to end their lives prematurely?

Doctor Andrew Fergusson of the Care Not Killing Alliance has said, "the simple truth is that the current law [in the UK] exists to protect those without a voice: the disabled, terminally ill and elderly, who might otherwise feel pressured into ending their lives."

Could the 'right to die' not impose a 'duty to die'? And of course, it is not only those who are themselves facing death who may want assistance to die. Might the chronically, but not terminally, ill person, also want to die?

As I have worked as a pastoral counsellor and now as part of our Church team who operate a 'Bereavement Café,' I have noticed how often those who have lost loved ones can also feel suicidal for a time. They may think that 'life is no longer worth living' and sink into depression.

Should they also have the right to die? And if we assume that everyone has a right to die, would that not impose on doctors a duty to kill?

Sadly, neither can we forget that in legal history, some of the most infamous serial killers have been doctors and nurses.

So, these are some of the searching questions that must be faced. As Hamlet reminds us, they are not new. 'To be or not to be?' has been an issue for a long time. For him, it all ended in tragedy (he was poisoned by the hands of others).

For Christians, death ends in victory. Nevertheless, God's people may go through some dark times before they taste that victory ~ Moses, Job, Jeremiah, Jonah, for example ~ and what about Elijah? He had 'had enough' and asked that God would take his life (1 Ki. 19:4). However, God refused to answer Elijah's prayer!

Although (according to the Campaign for Dignity in Dying) 84% of the public support the choice of assisted dying for terminally ill adults, all the research shows that most people are clear about how and where they personally want to die. They want to die with dignity and to be as pain-free as possible. They would much prefer to die at home, privately, but with some family members and close friends around. They may wish to have their favourite music playing and, if they are Christians, have some praise, prayer and portions of the Bible read to them.

It is true that these circumstances are not granted to everyone, but they are, it seems, the preferred way in which most people, given the choice, want to die.

George Irving – November 2023

Unless otherwise acknowledged, Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version ® NIV ® Copyright © 1973,1978,1984,2011 by Biblica, Inc.

Used with permission. All rights reserved worldwide.