

EUTHANASIA MOTION

I speak as a palliative care doctor. Palliative care is specialty care for terminally ill patients.

Our state and federal parliaments have been asked to consider changing the law to allow euthanasia. We are told that 85% of Australians support such a change.¹

I believe that what this shows us may not be so much how many people support euthanasia, so much as the fact that many people don't actually know what it is. Having discussed euthanasia on talkback radio many times over the years, I have come to realize that misconceptions are rife amongst the general public. Confusion abounds regarding what the legalization of euthanasia means. But first we need to know what euthanasia is not.

Euthanasia is not the administration of the medications needed to ease pain and discomfort at the end of life. Morphine given in the doses needed for pain does not shorten life. It may actually increase survival.

Euthanasia is not the avoidance of burdensome or futile treatments which prolong the process of dying instead of the process of life.

Euthanasia is not the switching off of life support machines even when we know it will lead to the death of the patient.

None of these things are euthanasia. They are standard practice at the end of life. They have been intentionally confused with euthanasia in order to increase support. And you know what? I think it's worked.....for up to 85% of the population. Apparently a billboard on the Hume Highway at Yagoona is making sure everyone knows the numbers.²

But many people have been misled.

¹ Newspan (2009) Voluntary Euthanasia Study. Prepared for Dying with Dignity NSW. Available at: <http://www.dwdv.org.au/DOCS/Newspanurvey2009.pdf>

² <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/message-goes-out-on-right-to-choose-death-20101018-16qxn.html>

Pain and suffering at the end of life is not inevitable. Palliative care services can do much to keep the dying comfortable.³

No mentally competent person has to undergo treatments they do not want, even if refusal means that their lives are shortened.

When we switch off life support machines it does not kill the patient. The underlying disease kills the patient. That's why they were on life support in the first place.

None of these things is euthanasia. None of these things requires a change in the law. They are legal and ethical options which already exist in appropriate situations.

Euthanasia refers to the deliberate administration of a drug which is intended to cause death of someone who is suffering. A doctor killing a patient. No more, no less.

We do not need legal euthanasia for people to have a say in what happens at the end of life. Many of the fears held by people in our community are needless. They think they would want the option of euthanasia when they face their own death, but evidence suggests that most of them they won't.

If you look at those people who are staring death in the face, people like my patients, they tend to think quite differently. A study in Sydney showed that the number of people requesting euthanasia in a palliative care service was 2.8% when they first showed up, falling to less than 1% once care was started. Less than 1% of patients persisted in their request for euthanasia.⁴ They tend to want more time, not less.

³ See <http://www.palliativecare.org.au/>

⁴ Glare, P. A. (1995). "The euthanasia controversy. Decision-making in extreme cases." *MJA* **163**: 558.

Chances are that most of the 85% of people interviewed were not terminally ill. They don't realize what it will be like at the end. It's not surprising, because most Australians don't have much contact with death.

But that is not the main reason I personally oppose euthanasia. My concern is the social consequences of legalization which have been seen in those places where euthanasia is law.

One such case is the Netherlands. Euthanasia was decriminalized in Holland in 2002 after 20 years of widespread practice under legal guidelines. Euthanasia was allowed for those experiencing intolerable suffering at the end of life. By the time the law had passed, the courts had already legitimized the death of patients who were not terminally ill. Then they allowed it for people whose suffering was not physical.⁵ The Dutch are currently debating the need to allow people over 70 years of age to be killed when they are 'tired of life'⁶. And early in 2005 a Dutch hospital published their guidelines on how to kill disabled newborn babies.⁷

The number of reported euthanasia deaths in Holland rose 13% last year to 2636, following an increase of 10% in 2008⁸. Euthanasia is becoming more common. A generation of Dutch have had members of the Voluntary Euthanasia society giving them talks at school regarding the benefits of euthanasia. There are advertisements on TV. The taboo surrounding euthanasia is fading.

But it is not the community acceptance of euthanasia which disturbs me so much as the abuse. Proponents of euthanasia will tell you that legal guidelines will prevent this happening, but the facts suggest otherwise.

⁵ Sheldon, T. (1994). Dutch argue that mental torment justifies euthanasia. *BMJ*;308:431-432.

⁶ Dutch News.nl. 09-02-2010. Tired of life? Group calls for assisted suicide.

⁷ Eduard Verhagen, M. D., J.D., and Pieter J.J. Sauer, M.D., Ph.D. (2005). "The Groningen Protocol — Euthanasia in Severely Ill Newborns." *NEJM* 352(10): 959-962.

⁸ Euthanasia cases in Holland rise by 13 per cent in a year – Telegraph.co.uk.c By Simon Caldwell
Published: 6:04PM BST 20 Jun 2010

The Dutch Government's first euthanasia report was published in 1991. The Rummelink report showed that around 1/3 euthanasia deaths the previous year occurred without the patient's knowledge or consent (around 1000/year).⁹

In 1995 it was a similar number, working out to be 1 in 5 cases of euthanasia being performed without the clear and explicit request of the patient.¹⁰

In 1998, 1200 people in the Netherlands were given lethal injections without their knowledge. Over 100 of those patients were mentally competent. And so it goes on.

There are stringent guidelines in place in Holland, but the numbers continue to grow.

Belgium legalized euthanasia a year after Holland and is going down the same track even more quickly. In 1998, 1796 people were killed by euthanasia without consent, making it more common that year than euthanasia with consent.

Minors and brain damaged people can be killed under the legislation. You can buy euthanasia kits at the chemist for about 60 euros.¹¹

This is the experience of those places where euthanasia has been legalized. Don't count on your doctor being a protector of life.

But euthanasia is unnecessary – palliative care services can ease the suffering at the end of life. Palliative care has always been underdeveloped in Holland.

Euthanasia is dangerous – the vulnerable who cannot or will not request euthanasia

⁹ doi: 10.1136/jme.20.4.212 1994 20: 212-217

J Med Ethics H Jochemsen Euthanasia in Holland: an ethical critique of the new law.

¹⁰ Henk Jochemsen and John Keown. Voluntary euthanasia under control? Further empirical evidence from the Netherlands. *Journal of Medical Ethics* 1999;25: 16-21

¹¹ Euthanasia Policy and Practice in Belgium: Critical Observations and Suggestions for Improvement
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are at risk.

We have a God who has a special concern for the vulnerable. They will be at risk if euthanasia is legalized. I urge you to support this motion against euthanasia.