Euthanasia Essay, Research Paper

Euthanasia

submitted by ???

Euthanasia, as defined in Microsoft Encarta 95′, is “the act of painlessly ending the

life of a person for reasons of mercy.” This paper will examine the history of euthanasia

and the issues surrounding assisted suicide. There are as many reasons for supporting

assisted suicide as there are reasons to not support it. However one looks at this topic,

we will all be confronted with this in one way or another. Medical technology has allowed

life to be sustained longer than anyone would have imagined. According to a former

church moderator, Walter Farquaharson, the issue of euthanasia “is not an issue any one of

us can remove ourselves from. It touches all of us. And if it hasn’t, it will (McAteer

J13).

Euthanasia, or also known as assisted suicide, was an accepted practice in earlier

civilizations. It was considered legally and morally to be a permissible way to die.

However, it has been a hot topic for the last several years. At first it was just another

topic, but later became a political issue that would affect courts and elections by dividing

those who support euthanasia and those who consider it a form of murder. It also has

been a topic that has divided the Christian community. A movement began in the 1970’s

when Americans started to demand “death with dignity” (Worsnop 1). In the event of a

terminal illness or injury, people were refusing life-sustaining treatment to preserve life,

especially life without quality. Public opinion overall supports some form of assisted

suicide. Because of this support, most states have some form of legislation that allows for

“living wills” and “power of attorney for health care” to be planned for in advance of a

person’s need to consider this (Bulletin 95-2).

Euthanasia is illegal in all states except Oregon. In many states, there are appeals

and court action because some courts declared the laws unconstitutional. Wisconsin

Statutes, Section 940.12 states, “Whoever with intent that another take his or her own life

assists such person to commit suicide is guilty of a Class D felony” (Bulletin 95-2).

Wisconsin does not recognize a doctor, or other individual, to end a life. It is considered

an act of murder and is punishable by law. The penalty is imprisonment up to five years

and a fine of up to $10,000, or both. However, there are two companion bills that were

introduced in Wisconsin in 1995. Assembly Bill 174 and Senate Bill 90 permit some

individuals to make written requests to ask for medication from a physician to end their

own life. The patient must have a terminal illness and not be expected to live longer than

six months. The physician must be the one who is making the primary health care

decisions for that patient, but another physician and a psychiatrist must also be consulted.

There are many steps and safeguards in place that must be done before this can happen.

There is also time allowed for the individual to change his/her mind (Bulletin 95-2).

Most opponents of euthanasia are from the Christian community. For example,

the Roman Catholic Church considers it murder and illegal. The church feels that life

should be preserved and that taking one’s own life is considered suicide and punishable by

God. It does, however, allow a seriously ill person the right to refuse extraordinary

medical procedures to preserve life (McAteer J13). Other opponents feel that it can get

out of control and become an abuse of power. Just who can decide who can live and die

is an issue that reminds some people of Nazi Germany where those in power decided that

individuals who were no longer valuable to the community were killed (Encarta). Many

doctors are also troubled by this issue, because they say a creed that they will preserve life

at all costs. This creed was written long before modern medicine and new life-saving

techniques were available. Quantity of life is sometimes exchanged for quality of life.

Opponents also fear that because of the increased success that doctors have had in

transplanting human organs, euthanasia will be practiced to sacrifice some weaker

individuals so that stronger individuals needing transplants will be given them (Encarta).

Some elderly patients also feel that they may be sacrificed before they are really ready to

die. There is also the issue of assisted suicide being performed on individuals who really

are not as sick as they were diagnosed. Many patients who are diagnosed with a terminal

illness live longer than was predicted. Some even may be “cured” because of new medical

procedures and medicines (Worsnop 153). Many of these arguments have validity, but

should be balanced with one’s right to choose life or death.

In a poll taken in January 1991, sixty-six percent of the people surveyed felt that a

person suffering ” great pain” or with “no hope of improvement ” has the right to end their

own life (Worsnop 148). Euthanasia should be an acceptable practice when someone has

been diagnosed with a terminal illness and there is no chance for a decent quality of life.

By 1990, forty states had passed laws that made “living wills” legal. These wills make it

legal for a competent individual to decide in advance that they wish to withhold life-

support systems and medicines that would sustain their lives (Encarta). If an individual is

declared “brain dead” by a licensed doctor, it is at the discretion of the family members to

terminate the life-support system. Beside the medical ethics issue, there is also the cost of

keeping individuals on life-support systems when there is no quality of life. Many times,

the individuals are in a coma and can live a long time, being totally unaware of their

surroundings. Sometimes a family spends their entire life savings keeping someone alive.

This takes a mental toll also, having to decide when to visit and the feelings of guilt that

more cannot be done. The Hemlock Society is an organization that was established in

1980 by Derek Humphry. They support “voluntary euthanasia for the terminally ill

through assisted suicide” (Worsnop 153). It has 47,000 members, which include several

hundred doctors. Because of Humphry’s book, Final Exit, which became a #1 best-seller

on The New York Times list, the society has grown by approximately twenty percent. The

book gives suggestions on how to end one’s life. This shows that many people are taking

this issue seriously enough to join an organization and to research information that they

may use in the future.

The right to die with dignity is a personal choice that needs to be not taken lightly.

Many considerations need to be well-thought out. Euthanasia affects not only the person

who dies, but other family, friends and those doctors or individuals who help make that

decision. This decision is not for everyone. However, those who are facing an uncertain

shortened future should be allowed to make this decision for themselves. Many

safeguards need to be in place and legislation needs to be introduced to address this issue.

It is a decision that no one ever hopes to have to make, but by ignoring it, it will not go

away.