Euthanasia

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Abstract

This paper will focus on voluntary euthanasia. The paper will lay out the arguments for and against euthanasia. It will include the results of a local survey conducted by the paper’s author where respondents were asked questions on the subject of euthanasia. The objective of the paper is to describe why the terminally ill should have the option of ending their suffering. Further, the purpose of the paper is to explain why opponents don’t want the measure to gain popularity and become legal across the country.

Keywords: euthanasia, terminally ill, Dr. Jack Kevorkian, Oregon
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In February 2001, a large cancerous mass was discovered in the chest of my friend’s pet dog, Buffy. Because Buffy was 13 years old, and the size of the mass, the veterinarian recommended against surgery to remove the cancerous growth. It was his professional opinion that removing all the cancer without inflicting additional harm was unlikely.

At that point, Buffy’s longtime veterinarian detailed her life expectancy as less than six months and told my friend what he should expect going forward. The veterinarian knew how much my friend loved Buffy, and in the gentlest way, told him that when her decline accelerated, he would know what to do.

The last week of March 2001, Buffy became almost lifeless. She slept more than 20 hours a day; my friend was feeding her with a spoon and she had little desire for water or nourishment. Memories of years of happiness and seeing her then, it became very clear that it was time to say goodbye to this dearly loved companion.

In January 2007, Barbaro, the 2006 Kentucky Derby winner was put down because of complications from a painful break he suffered during the ’06 Preakness. Barbaro suffered for eight months before the decision was made to put him down (sports.espn.go.com).

For many people their pet, whether 20 pounds or 11-hundred pounds, is treated as a family member and decisions are made with the animal’s welfare and that of the family in mind.

In so many cases, pet owners are forced to make the painful decision to euthanize their adored pet because the expert opinion of a veterinarian points out that there is no hope of the animal returning to its glory days or living an even partially fulfilled life.

So, if we can put a pet out of its misery and it has no say in the matter, why can’t we do the same for a human being who in many cases can express their opinion?
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As humans, most of us fear death and we don’t want to die, but sometimes death is the only peace that we can receive to eliminate agonizing pain.

As we go about our daily routines we want to be in control. Not only do we want to control our life, many of us want to have control over our death when there’s no drug, treatment or process that can alleviate excruciating pain.

However, countless would argue that only God should have control over that enviable fate and any other action such as euthanasia is deemed as devaluing human life. Some would suggest that euthanasia is a way to control health care costs.

It is understandable why there is opposition to euthanasia because actions that begin with a good purpose can sometimes end badly.

Critics of euthanasia will state that legalizing any form of the practice will result in non-voluntary euthanasia (en.wikipedia.org). It’s an assertion that cannot go unaddressed.

If someone is enjoying happy relationships, can communicate, and is not in unbearable pain, then most people would agree that euthanasia is wrong. But, if the patient cannot communicate or is suffering so much they cannot enjoy life, then why not have euthanasia as an option?

In 1976 after a 13 month battle, my 21 year old brother died from a rare form of cancer. Euthanasia would never have been a choice for my brother because of my family’s belief that God was going to heal him. The reality was that my brother was terminally ill and the doctors could no longer do anything to help him other than give him high dosages of morphine to cope with the pain.
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I believe that euthanasia should have at least been an option. A terminal disease or an injury from a car wreck or some other unexpected act can leave a person unable to care for themselves or in an irreversible coma.

For many, the mere thought of losing control over one’s well-being causes them to consider euthanasia or assisted suicide. Some people create a living will that states that desires if they are wound up in an irreversible coma. They can be costly if an attorney is hired to draw up the will.

As humans, society expects us to grow up, gain an education, and find a way to make a successful living. Although some people make wrong choices, and end up incarcerated or homeless, the bottom line is we have choices. So should we be allowed to make the choice to die if our life is incapacitated because of an illness?

Euthanasia gives us a way to eliminate unbearable pain, yet it also can help reduce the cost of caring for a terminally ill person. However, at the top of the list, it gives an individual control over how they want to live out their final days, enabling them to die with dignity.

Proponents of euthanasia argue that death is a private matter and the state should not interfere with how one chooses to end their suffering. Most people have their pets put down if they are suffering, which is seen as an act of compassion and kindness. Why can’t the same be given to humans? (rsrevision.com).

Illness can take away the ability to make choices and dignity, leaving you with no quality of life; euthanasia allows you to take back control in deciding to die.
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The late Dr. Jack Kevorkian, can be described as the poster child for assisted suicide. He's the retired pathologist known as “Dr. Death,” who aided more than 130 people in ending their lives. His actions became public in a 60 Minutes interview.

Dr. Kevorkian paid the legal price for his belief in euthanasia. He was criminally prosecuted and sent to prison.

Former NBC News correspondent Betty Rollin did not suffer the same legal fate when she was faced with the life and death situation in the early 1980s. Her elderly mother was diagnosed with terminal ovarian cancer in 1981 and did not want to languish and suffer.

Rollin helped her mother end her life in 1983. She wrote about the ordeal in her book Last Wish published in 1985.

Since the book was published, Rollin has been active in the Death with Dignity movement (en.wikipedia.org). Rollin did not face criminal punishment for her actions because they were done covertly.

The Voluntary Euthanasia Society (EXIT) believes that faced with terminal illness, pain or a useless existence, for which there is no cure, everyone should be able to turn to euthanasia. They hope that the law will change to allow doctors to end the lives of people who have made it clear in writing, that this is what they want. As a safeguard, the patient should sign a request to make this possible at least 30 day in advance. (ves.org.nz)

Currently, Oregon is one of the six places in the world where laws specifically permit euthanasia or assisted suicide. On October 27, 1997 Oregon enacted the Death with Dignity Act which allows terminally-ill Oregonians to end their lives through the voluntary self
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administration of lethal medications, expressly prescribed by a physician for that purpose (public.health.oregon.gov). The patient and physician both must fill out forms agreeing to the act and two witnesses are required to sign off on the forms.

Healthcare professionals take The Hippocratic Oath, swearing to practice medicine ethically and honestly (en.wikipedia.org). The oath binds them to save lives, not take lives. However, in passive euthanasia medicine and other treatments are withheld so as to let the patient die. An argument can be made that passive euthanasia is crueler than active euthanasia because it will take longer to die, as a result the patient will suffer longer. The basic desire of many terminally ill people is to eliminate the excruciating pain sooner rather than later (www2.sunysuffolk.edu).

While bound by the Hippocratic Oath, physicians can find it mentally challenging to take a life even with the patient’s okay. Dr. Kenneth R. Stevens, Jr., M.D. wrote a paper on the subject entitled, “Emotional and Psychological Effects of Physician-Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia on Participating Physicians.”

He studied doctors in the Netherlands who have experience with assisted suicide and euthanasia, and have expressed concerns regarding the effects on doctors. The report that coincided stated that, “Many physicians who had practiced euthanasia mentioned that they would be most reluctant to do so again.” A Dutch physician who performed euthanasia noted that, “To kill someone is something far reaching and that is something that nags at your conscience” (Emotional and Psychological Effects of Physician-Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia on Participating Physicians Source: Issues in Law & Medicine, Volume 21, Number 3, 2006).
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Still, the argument over voluntary euthanasia should come down to choice. We have a choice over whether to terminate a pregnancy and there are physicians who are willing to perform the act. Undoubtedly, there are doctors who will help an individual end their life with euthanasia, so why not have a choice over whether to live a painful, useless and costly life and consequently being a burden on your family.

While some people believe when it's their time to leave this world, it is God who will make the decision; in a survey conducted locally of 20 people between the age of 29 and 74, seventy five percent felt that a person in a vegetative state should not be kept alive with the help of a machine. The survey showed that 55 percent would consider euthanasia if they had a terminally illness and could no longer breathe on their own. The poll found that 60 percent of the respondents believed that euthanasia should be legal. Nevertheless, seventy five percent also felt that a parent should not be able to end the life of a terminally ill infant or child. Of the three clergymen included in the survey, most opposed any form of euthanasia. However, only 35 percent of the respondents said they would consider euthanasia if they were terminally ill, severely handicapped and incapable of functioning by themselves.

Euthanasia is not the answer for every person who is terminally ill, incapacitated, or in a vegetative state. But if returning to your glory days or living an even partially fulfilled life is not remotely possible, I believe a human being should have the option of leaving the excruciating pain behind and dying with dignity.
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