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EUTHANASIA - AN ACT OF LOVE
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An Opinion

Attitudes towards euthanasia are changing. According to a 2005 Gallup poll, 75% of the respondents believed that people should have the right to choose to die. A person in intractable pain with no hope of improvement may have the moral right to commit end her/his life. In a national survey of physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia in the United States, "Eleven percent of the physicians said that under current legal constraints, there were circumstances in which they would be willing to hasten a patient's death by prescribing medication, and 7 percent said that they would provide a lethal injection; 36 percent and 24 percent, respectively, said that they would do so if it were legal" (1998, Meir, Emmons, et.al.) Many people consider the ending of the dying process as different from ending a life. The act of euthanasia could be considered an act of love.

By definition, euthanasia is derived from two Greek terms "eu," which means "good" and "thanatos," which means "death." Euthanasia can be interpreted as signifying a "good death," a "beneficial death," or an "acceptable death." Euthanasia is not considered killing. Killing, by definition, implies the taking of life against the will of the person who is to die.

There are two types of euthanasia, passive and active. Passive euthanasia is considered the act of allowing a person to die without attempting any "heroic measures" to sustain the individual's life. An infamous example of a passive euthanasia is the case of Karen Ann Quinlan. Following the ingestion of drugs and alcohol, Karen Ann lapsed into an irreversible coma. Her parents requested that she be taken off a respirator but allowed her to be fed through a nasogastric tube. She lived for almost ten years after she was removed from the respirator. The act of passive euthanasia allows the individual to die naturally.

Active euthanasia involves the taking of positive steps to end the life of a terminally ill individual. The Hemlock Society is a group that supports active euthanasia for the individual that rationally decides to end her/his life. A well known example of active euthanasia are the

actions of Dr. Jack Kevorkian. He developed and provided a "suicide machine" for individuals who were terminally ill and in intractable pain to use to end their lives. The assisting or self-administration of any act to facilitate the death of an individual can be considered an act of active euthanasia. The action of passive or active euthanasia is not wrong if the individual, whose life is to be ended, consciously has requested that her/his life be ended. The act of euthanasia is not intended to inflict harm on the individual but to end her/his pain and suffering.

Euthanasia can be morally supported by the principle of nonmaleficence. The moral principle of nonmaleficence espouses the belief of not inflicting harm on any person. The Hippocratic oath, the source of the principle of nonmaleficence, states,

That into whatsoever house you shall enter, it shall be for the good of the sick to the utmost of your power, your holding yourselves far aloof from wrong, from corruption, from the tempting of others to vice.

That you will exercise your art solely for the cure of your patients, and will give no drug, perform no operation, for criminal purpose, even if solicited, far less suggest it.

At first reading, the Hippocratic oath and the principle of nonmaleficence could be considered in conflict with the practice of euthanasia. However, euthanasia is not in conflict with the principle of nonmaleficence or the Hippocratic oath. The act of euthanasia does not cause the dying individual. The harm to the individual is the intractable pain and suffering of her/his continued life. Euthanasia is an act of love towards individuals who are suffering and wanting to die.

The morality and the legality of euthanasia should be two different discussions and considerations. The legality of euthanasia should be an evolution from the moral principles and beliefs of society regarding euthanasia. Morally, the terminating of an individual's life, either passively or actively, could be considered a positive action when its intention is to relieve pain and suffering.

In summary, the principle of nonmaleficence states that no harm should be brought upon any person. However, if a person is suffering, is terminally ill, and or the quality of life is

poor, than the use of euthanasia could be considered acceptable. The act of euthanasia ends the harm of an intractable situation. Physicians should be free to practice euthanasia if requested by their patient. Assisting a chronically suffering person to die should not be a breach of the principles of the Hippocratic oath. By practicing euthanasia, the physician does "good of the sick." The physician is relieving the person of the intractable pain and suffering of life. By relieving the individual of the pain of her/his condition, euthanasia is not inflicting harm but is an act of nonmaleficence towards the human being. It is an act of love.

Hippocratic Oath: http://nedv.net/health/hippocratic_oath.html

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