

# Dying with dignity (euthanasia)

[Health & Medicine](#), [Euthanasia](#)



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## **Introduction**

People have been suffering from terminal illnesses for centuries. Some physicians believed that these people should not have to suffer if that was their wishes. They had come up with the idea of euthanasia; euthanasia is the practice of ending the life of a person in a painless way.

Some people think that euthanasia is a crime just like murder; some others think that euthanasia is necessary for those people who are in unbearable pain and have no cure. The term, 'Euthanasia' comes from the Greek words eu meaning good, and thanatos meaning death, and is known as mercy

killing or assisted suicide, usually practiced on a terminally ill person. In some countries, euthanasia is legal and a third person can assist suicide under certain conditions. Many religions and medical practitioners opposed the idea of euthanasia and strongly claimed it to be illegal.

The debate on euthanasia is expected to continue in the future because there are both pros and cons to euthanasia. (Sandhyarani, 2011) When asked if doctors should be allowed to end the life of a patient who is suffering from a terminal illness and wants to die, 75% of Americans said “ yes. ” Although, euthanasia is prohibited by law in most states of the USA, this poll was based on statistics of Gallup Organization in 2007. In 2010, based on Angus Reid Public Opinion, 70% of Americans were pro when asked the same question. Opinion Polls/Surveys, 2011 ) The important terms that help to subdivide and classify euthanasia by type are: voluntary, which is a death performed by another with the consent of the person being killed, involuntary, which is a death performed by another without the consent of the person being killed, active euthanasia, where patient's death is caused by specific steps; such as injecting the patient with poison, and passive euthanasia, which is usually defined as withdrawing medical treatment with the deliberate intention of causing the patient's death.

## **History of Euthanasia**

Euthanasia has a very old history, and this theme has been both opposed and defended since ancient times. The first who used the word, euthanasia, was a Roman historian, Suetonius. Based on criticisms that were made in the address of those who have practiced euthanasia, it is assumed that the first traces of euthanasia started in Mesopotamia, River Ganges in India and in

ancient Israel. In the 16th century the first recommendation of euthanasia came by Thomas Mores, who said: When there is no cure and a patient suffers too much, the patient should be convinced to die.

The patient should realize that his illness is incurable, he is a burden to others and his suffering causes pity for people around him. In ancient Greece, when the physician gave medicine to the patient who was suffering extreme pain, and had an incurable terminal illness, classical Greek philosopher Plato strongly supported this action. He also believed that mentally and physically ill persons should be left to death because they do not have the right to live.

The first objection to euthanasia came from the Oath of most famous ancient Greek physician Hippocratic, which says: " I will not administer poison to anyone when asked to do so, nor suggest such a course. " In ancient Rome, euthanasia was a crime and this action was accepted as killing someone on purpose. For the first time in the 17th century in Prussia, the person who killed the patient with an incurable disease was punished as a guilty man. Euthanasia was both criticized and defended in the 20th century. In beginning of the 20th century, the trends of legalization of euthanasia began in the United States, but the government didn't accept these proposals, even though 53% of American physicians defended euthanasia. (Erdemir, 2001) In 1935 the euthanasia Society of England was formed to promote euthanasia, then in 1939, the first legalization of euthanasia was in Nazi Germany. The Nazi doctors took the lives of thousands of their fellow citizens on orders from the government. In 1996, in Australia the euthanasia went into effect, but it was overturned by the Parliament in 1997. The places

where euthanasia is legal are; Oregon, Washington, Switzerland, Netherlands and Belgium.

## **Medicine**

Euthanasia, sometimes known as "mercy-killing," is the intentional ending of a patient's life by a physician, usually by lethal injection. One of the most known physicians who practiced euthanasia was Jack Kevorkian. He was a pathologist, and commonly known as "Dr. Death." From June 1990 through January 1996, 27 people died using one of Kevorkian's machines, and in total he said that he assisted at least 130 patients to end their lives. In 1999, Kevorkian was found guilty, and served eight years of a 10-to-25-year prison sentence for second degree murder.

He was released on parole on June 1, 2007; on the condition that he would not offer suicide advice to any other person. "I will admit, like Socrates and Aristotle and Plato and some other philosophers, that there are instances where the death penalty would seem appropriate." (Kevorkian) The euthanasia device is a machine engineered to allow an individual to die quickly with minimal pain. They may be operated by a physician, or by the person wishing to die. In 1989 Kevorkian described his original death machine called "Thanatron".

This device involved an individual pushing a button that released drugs or chemicals that would end his or her own life. The second model he used was called "Mercitron". It was similar to the first one, except a gas mask fed by a canister of carbon monoxide was attached to a face mask with a tube. The third model was invented by Philip Nitschke, who is an Australian

medical doctor. He named his device " Deliverance Machine" which was programmed to ask the patient a series of questions, that, if answered correctly, a lethal injection of barbiturates was automatically administered.

In 2008, Dr. Nitschke invented another device called " Exit's Euthanasia Device" which used an ordinary barbecue gas bottle, filled with nitrogen and a plastic suicide bag. The gas is more psychological, with no chance of adverse reaction. " So it's extremely quick and there are no drugs. Importantly this doesn't fail – it's reliable, peaceful, and available and with the additional benefit of undetectability. " (Philip Nitschke)

## **Ethics**

According to Garn LeBaron, the patient, his loved ones and the physicians all face ethical dilemmas when determining whether euthanasia is an ethical choice.

Most physicians that are against euthanasia believe that for hundreds of years of tradition, the doctors were dedicated to healing patients, not killing them. On an individual level, the person must make a decision whether or not to end their life. They may believe that based on their self interest and their personal benefit, it would be better to die believing they would be a financial, physical or emotional burden to their families should they live out their illness until their body dies on its own.

In contrast, they may choose to live for the good of others and for the sake of loved ones, to spare them the pain and turmoil to make and support such a decision. Should the family have to consider mercy killing due to a family member being in a permanent vegetative state, then they would have to

consider quality of life versus value of life in general. They may also follow through on any wishes the patient may have made known prior to the vegetative state. The physician's moral ethical issues are that they have a duty to preserve life at all costs but also have a duty to respect the wishes of their patient.

I fully realize that there are times when those who have the noble duty to tend the sick and the dying are deeply moved by the sufferings of their patients... Then, perhaps, it seems that universal moral principles are mere abstractions having little to do with the agony of the dying. But of course we do not see best when our eyes are filled with tears. (Layton, 1997 )

## **Religion Views**

According to Michigan's Religious Leaders Forum, a group of Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders, those who promote this last, fatal escape as a "right" should remember that such a right may quickly become an expectation and, finally, even a duty to die.

They fear that eventually some individuals and families will be forced to put financial concerns above the needs of loved ones. The Roman Catholic Church considers euthanasia as a "crime against life" and a "crime against God". The Catholic Church is against the practice of euthanasia. According to the Holy Bible, Jesus Christ has a plan for each life, and shortening that plan interrupts what he wants to accomplish in that person. Although Protestants are part of Christianity, on the other side, they take more liberal views, and they offered religious arguments and support for limited forms of euthanasia.

Among Protestantism, Judaism has become divided . Jewish thinkers oppose voluntary euthanasia but the preponderance of anti-euthanasia sentiment has shifted in recent years to increasing support for certain passive euthanasia options. In the same way as Roman Catholic Church, Islam categorically forbids all forms of suicide and any action that may help another to kill them. The Islamic prophet Mohammed refuses to bless the body of a person who had committed suicide. Islamic jurisprudence, based on a convincing interpretation of the holy Koran, does not recognize a person's right to die voluntarily.

In Hinduism there are two points of view on euthanasia. By helping to end a painful life a person is performing a good deed, but on the other hand a person is disturbing the timing of the cycle of death and rebirth. The Jainism religion, without hesitation supports euthanasia because they think that liberation from the cycles of lives is the primary objective in the religion. Similarly, in Shinto religion, the prolongation of life using artificial means is a disgraceful act against life, so most of the people who practice this religion support the practice of euthanasia. Religious views on euthanasia)

## **Emotions**

The euthanasia debate is quite controversial. Many people have their own opinions, but to truly understand euthanasia and decide if you are for or against it, it is important to look at a real life story. Angela Belucciu who was diagnosed with cancer, and a supporter of euthanasia said: You can't imagine, living with the fear of facing death itself is not scary for me, the manner of my death at the present time without Nembutal or something like that, without that my end, my death is not pleasant.



Anyone can describe the pain experienced by people with terminal illness, but to feel the pain the way they do, we must be in their skin. To listen and experience are totally different acts. Although the number of supporters, according to statistics is high, some clinics have gone too far. Dignitas is a Swiss assisted dying group that helps those with terminal illness, and severe physical and mental illnesses to die assisted by qualified doctors and nurses. There was a shocking case that happened in this clinic, when a doctor had committed suicide after he found out that he had helped a woman, with a false diagnosis, die.

The statement of “ Dignitas” staff testified that irrespective of medical condition, it does not matter what people are suffering from, they do not refuse anyone. (Vanderheyden, 2005). Questions arise whether it is right to legalize euthanasia only for people with terminal illness, or whether it will be respected by physicians and clinics? Certainly it would be difficult to get answers because in such cases the reaction of family members and loved ones would encourage debate in society at large.

## **Conclusion**

Euthanasia has been practiced for hundreds of years all over the world by thousands of people from all walks of life. Religions have different views on the use of physician assisted suicides; some would say it is selfish of the family and patient to not let their " God" decide when it is their time to die and others would agree that it is a merciful way to end suffering for the dying person. There is and always will be strong ethical views on helping persons end their suffering. However, with the help of a practicing physician,

it can also be seen as an inhumane decision or a loving decision. The ethical views are documented and are strongly stated either way.

The only thing that will matter in the end is how the family interprets their decision. It won't matter how long it was practiced for, who started it, which religious groups agree or disagree, ethical views from either side of this highly debatable issue, or any documentation regarding euthanasia, the family will have only one person in mind when deciding to help their loved one end their suffering or not. It cannot be an easy decision because of the abuses that might occur, or by any means for either the dying person or the family, for in the end the ones who go on living will have to live with what they have decided.

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