

Death



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Death In the world of humans, the word, 'death' is a bye-product of culture as it is of nature. Death of an individual, in our society can have very different emotional, medical and ethical connotations for all others who are still alive. One common false notion among all of us about death has been that, death is “ something that happens to others but not to oneself, at least not for a very long time” (Aiken, 2001, p. 6). One dictionary definition of death is, “ death is 'the act of dying; the end of life; the total and permanent cessation of all the vital functions of an organism'” (as cited in Aiken, 2001, p. 7). A person's death can undermine the emotional and economic security of many others. The hospitals and health care systems have become such an all-encompassing establishment that “ personally witnessed death has become an uncommon event in many Western countries” (Aiken, 2001, p. 6). This phenomenon has been viewed as an attempt to “ deny the reality of death” (Aiken, 2001, p. 6). All the same, media, especially visual media have been showing vivid pictures and scenes of death so enthusiastically that death has become a daily affair for the viewers (Aiken, 2001, p. 6). In this way, death has become a fearsome taboo as well as an enjoyable spectacle, on two extremes of our modern times. In medical terms, it can be said that: When the body dies, cells in the higher brain centers, which are very susceptible to oxygen deprivation, die first. This usually occurs between 5 to 10 min after the supply of oxygen is cut off. Next to die are the cells in the lower brain centers, including those in the medulla oblongata, which is the regulator of respiration, heartbeat and other vital reflexes (Aiken, 2001, p. 7). There are other perspectives on death as described by different branches of human thought. For example, “ a person is said to be psychologically dead when his or her mind (the seat of conscious experiencing and knowing) ceases to

function" (Aiken, 2001, p. 8). Legal death is determined by " a judgment by a legal authority that a person is dead and therefore his or her possessions may be distributed by the survivors or beneficiaries" (Aiken, 2001, p. 8). It can be seen that determination of biological death is influenced by " medical, ethical and legal" matters in a particular social context (Aiken, 2001, p. 8). Doctor-assisted suicide has been accepted legally by many countries, and in such a context, death is viewed from a totally different perspective. When the patient is suffering severely from an incurable illness, doctor-assisted suicide becomes an act of humane concern (Wellman, p. 53). Another ethical question that is related to death is, when exactly to declare that an individual is dead. The decision on this question has a heavy bearing on organ transplantation (Veatch, 1997, p. 247). Each nation has formulated its definition of death after reviewing the " theological, philosophical, legal and medical literature and wide consultation with experts and with the public" (Veath, 1997, p. 246). Different cultures have been found to view death in different ways. For example, in Indian Hindu culture, the belief in rebirth is so strong that people want to rescue their souls from the never ending cycle of life and birth and attain enlightenment. This is why many Indian religious groups have a habit of singing and rejoicing when a loved one is dead and taken to the grave. References Aiken, L. R. (2001) Dying, death and bereavement, London: Routledge. Veath, R. M. (1997) Medical ethics, Sudbury, MA: Jones & Bartlett Learning. Wellman, C. (2005) Medical law and moral rights, Berlin: Springer.