Euthanasia: Wisdom or Folly?

To the Editor—Several aspects of the article by Truog and Berde regarding physician-assisted suicide concern me.

First, I find little evidence for the nationwide acceptance of euthanasia that the authors cite in various polls, suggesting that from the article referenced, it is unclear whether the respondents understood the distinction between allowing a patient to die as painlessly as possible and actively taking their own life using a painless method. Moreover, the recent defeat of pro-euthanasia initiatives in California and Washington suggests an opposite trend.

Second, I seriously question the rationale offered for such a radical departure from traditional patient care. Certainly, anesthesiologists should provide the greatest possible pain relief for patients, but assisted suicide is at best a truncation of true pain relief. Saunders describes total pain as encompassing physical, emotional, social, and spiritual well-being. A model of truly compassionate care seeking to address all these needs comes not from Kevorkian but from the National Hospice Organization, a medically directed, interdisciplinary program of palliative and supportive services for dying persons and their families that “focuses on maintaining the quality of remaining life.” Significantly, Hospice has soundly rejected the practice of assisted suicide.

Truog and Berde idealize assisted suicide as an act motivated by compassion and respect for individual autonomy, yet, only a generation after the Holocaust, they cannot deny the great potential for abuse. Nonetheless, they brush aside this concern, ignoring the voice of professionals such as psychiatrist Dr. Leo Alexander, expert witness at the Nuremberg Trials, who describes the beginnings of the Nazi euthanasia movement as “merely a subtle shift in emphasis in the basic attitude of physicians... the acceptance of the attitude... that there is such a thing as life not worthy to be lived.”

National Hospice Organization; Statement of the National Hospice Organization Opposing the Legalization of Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide: Resolution approved by the Delegates of the National Hospice Organization annual meeting, Detroit, Michigan, November 8, 1990, pp 1–9.


References


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