

Stuart Cunliffe

What is euthanasia?

The word comes from the Greek *eu* and *thanatos*, which together mean 'good death.' Euthanasia is the intentional killing of a patient either by act or omission, supposedly in the patient's own interest. Voluntary euthanasia is killing the person at the person's request. Involuntary euthanasia is killing the person without his request, and possibly against his will. Nonvoluntary euthanasia is killing a person unable to make such a request, such as a young child or sufferer from dementia.

Stuart Cunliffe has been part of the leadership of IMAGE since its inception. Euthanasia is one of his particular concerns.

What ethical issues are involved?

The Bible teaches that man, unlike the rest of the animal kingdom, is made in God's image and likeness (Genesis 1:26, 27). It forbids the taking of innocent human life (Genesis 9:6; Exodus 20:13). For the Christian, the most important consideration will be *You shall not murder* (Exodus 20:13).

There are arguments against allowing euthanasia, however, apart from the Bible. It would be virtually impossible to ensure adequate safeguards. Once it were decided that life did not have absolute value and some people's lives were not worth living, where would it stop? The 'slippery slope' argument is a valid one. Permitting abortion for a few women led to abortion on demand. In Holland, where voluntary euthanasia was legalised, voluntary euthanasia has led to involuntary euthanasia. What effect would the practice of euthanasia have on the medical profession? What would be the effect on relationships between the medical profession and patients? What would be the effect on the rest of society? How would euthanasia affect respect for life in the community?

What is the legal position?

Euthanasia and assisting someone to commit suicide are illegal in Britain.

In 1993 British courts ruled for the first time that administering food and drink by tube is medical treatment, which could be withheld if it were decided it was in the patient's best interests to do so. Tony Bland, a young man brain injured in the Hillsborough football stadium disaster, was not on a life-support machine or in pain, but doctors said he was in 'persistent vegetative state' and his condition would not improve. He had food and water withheld from him, with the approval of the High Court, the Appeal Court and the House of Lords, until he died. This was the first time in history English courts sanctioned the death of an innocent man who was not already dying. Courts later gave permission for food and water to be withdrawn from other patients, not all of them in 'persistent vegetative state.'

In 1997 the Government redefined euthanasia for the first time. It was always understood that euthanasia was an act of commission or an act of omission causing death. In 1997, however, the Government published a green paper describing euthanasia as 'a deliberate intervention with the express aim of ending life,' with no mention of killing by omission, allowing the Government to claim since 1997 that withdrawing food and water from patients is not euthanasia.

In 1999 the British Medical Association issued new guidelines saying doctors could now withdraw medical treatment, including food and water, from patients such as those having had a severe stroke or suffering from Alzheimer's disease, or from seriously handicapped babies, and should not need to seek court permission. There were reports of hospital patients having food and water withdrawn and being left to die, and police were called in to investigate a number of hospitals.

In 2000, Scottish legislation allowed for 'welfare attorneys' who would be able to take decisions on patients unable to take decisions for themselves, including the withdrawal of food and fluids by tube.

The Medical Capacity Act, forced through Parliament by the Government at Westminster, came into effect in 2007. It says doctors are legally obliged to observe living wills – documents which patients can sign in advance stipulating withdrawal of treatment, including food and water, in the event of their becoming incapacitated. It allows powers of attorney to be granted by patients to a friend or relative so that a person with powers of attorney could order doctors to withdraw food and water if the patient became unable to take decisions for himself or herself, even if the attorney stood to benefit from the patient's will. Critics complained that living wills requesting food and water to be withdrawn would be legally binding, but living wills requesting food and water to be continued would not.

Several attempts in Parliament to legalise doctor-assisted suicide have been unsuccessful.

What can Christians do about euthanasia?

Christians can speak out against euthanasia whenever they have opportunity. They can pray politicians, lawyers, doctors and nurses will recognise the absolute value of human life. They can write to politicians and the media in protest at moves to facilitate euthanasia.

They can visit the lonely, the sick and the elderly, who would be the first to be threatened by euthanasia. Concerned agencies say that as the number of old people increases and there are increasing demands on NHS funds, so pressure to help the old and seriously ill to an early death can be expected to increase. Christians can support the hospice movement. Pioneered in Britain and supported largely by voluntary funds, the hospice movement does a wonderful work in providing palliative care for the terminally ill. Further effective palliative care needs to be made available. More care needs to be made available for the chronic sick, for the elderly, for Aids victims. Christians should understand that care costs time and money, but care, not killing, must be our aim.

For further reading

Cameron, Nigel M. de S., ed. *Death without Dignity: Euthanasia in perspective*. Rutherford House Books, Edinburgh, 1990.

Keown, John. *Euthanasia Examined: Ethical, clinical and legal perspectives*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

Ling, John R. *Responding to the Culture of Death*. Day One Publications, Epsom, 2001.

Twycross, Robert. *A pain-free death?* Medical Education Trust, London.

Wyatt, John. *Matters of Life and Death*. Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1998.

For further information

ALERT, 27 Walpole Street, London SW3 4QS, telephone 020 7730 2800 (www.alertuk.org).

CARE, 53 Romney Street, London SW1P 3RF, telephone 020 7233 0455 (www.care.org.uk).

Christian Medical Fellowship, 6 Marshalsea Road, London SE1 1HL, telephone 020 7234 9660 (www.cmf.org.uk).

Hospice Information, Hospice House, 34-44 Britannia Street, London WC1X 9JG, telephone 0870 903 3903 (www.hospiceinformation.info).