What is Euthanasia?

Euthanasia is usually taken to mean ‘mercy killing’ and is applied to situations where a patient is suffering severely or is enduring a terminal illness.

Euthanasia can more helpfully be defined as ‘the intentional killing by act or omission of a person whose life is felt to be not worth living’.

The following are not euthanasia:

• stopping a medically futile treatment where the burden of that treatment would outweigh the benefits;

• giving treatments aimed at relieving pain and other symptoms even when the treatment may very occasionally carry some foreseeable risk of shortening life. Confusingly known as ‘double effect’, it is more helpful to realise that the doctor’s intention is pain relief, not the shortening of life;

• when a mentally competent person chooses to refuse treatment. Doctors cannot force patients to have treatment against their will and it is legal for a patient to refuse treatment. If the patient then dies it is not euthanasia.

Here are a few useful terms:

Living will (advance statement, advance directive) - a document prepared by a mentally competent individual wherein the person states what they do not want to receive with regard to medical treatment and care should they become incompetent in the future and no longer able to express their wishes. An individual cannot request to have any particular kind of treatment, nor ask for a life to be ended. The Mental Capacity Act 2005 has made these legally binding.

Palliative care - the holistic care of patients with incurable, advanced progressive illness expected to end in death, providing physical measures such as pain management and psychological, social and spiritual support.

Physician-assisted suicide (PAS) - the doctor indirectly performs a lethal act, assisting the patient to terminate their own life. In PAS the doctor prescribes lethal medication which the patient swallows. In cases where the patient cannot take the medication, or where the suicide attempt fails, the doctor administers a lethal injection.

Voluntary euthanasia - the person desires their life to be ended and makes persistent and durable’ requests.
Non-voluntary euthanasia - the person lacks capacity and has not requested to be euthanized.

Involuntary euthanasia - a mentally competent person is not consulted and arguably their life is ended against their own will.

In 2004 the Lord Joffe Bill to legalise PAS was defeated.

The arguments for euthanasia:

1. We need it - the compassion argument. Supporters of euthanasia believe that allowing people to ‘die with dignity’ is kinder than forcing them to continue their lives with suffering.

2. We want it - the autonomy argument. Some believe that every patient has a right to choose when to die.

3. We can control it - the public policy argument. Proponents believe that euthanasia can be safely regulated by government legislation.

The counter arguments:

1. Alternative treatments are available, such as palliative care and hospices. We do not have to kill the patient to kill the symptoms. Nearly all pain can be relieved.

2. There is no ‘right’ to be killed and there are real dangers of ‘slippery slopes’. Opening the doors to voluntary euthanasia could lead to non-voluntary and involuntary euthanasia, by giving doctors the power to decide when a patient’s life is not worth living. In the Netherlands in 1990 around 1,000 patients were killed without their request.

3. We could never truly control it. Reports from the Netherlands, where euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are legal, reveal that doctors do not always report it.

4. The assumption that patients should have a right to die would impose on doctors a duty to kill, thus restricting the autonomy of the doctor. Also, a ‘right to die’ for some people might well become a ‘duty to die’ by others, particularly those who are vulnerable or dependent upon others.

What does the Bible say?

Human life

Apart from the reference to the apparent ending of King Saul’s life at his own request by an Amalekite soldier in 2 Samuel 1, the Bible does not mention euthanasia specifically. However, it is clear that the Christian understanding of the value of human life leads away from euthanasia. We are made in the image of God and so human life is
uniquely precious (Genesis 1:26,27). Human life is also God's gift to us; we are not the owners but rather the stewards of it. The Bible also emphasises the 'preciousness' and 'sanctity' of human life, and there are strong restrictions on the taking of life.

Physical and emotional suffering

'Unbearable suffering' is one factor of terminal illness that some claim justifies euthanasia. But suffering is part of an authentic Christian life and part of the general human experience in a fallen world. Physical and emotional pain cannot ultimately be avoided. As Christians, we are challenged to maintain hope and perseverance in all situations.

Real compassion never kills

In the past proponents of euthanasia tended to argue on the grounds of compassion. Under this line of argument, it is kinder to provide someone with a means of ending their life or even actively killing them when there is no way to relieve physical suffering. However, as palliative and social care improves, this argument becomes less important. It is also increasingly clear from hospice professionals that suffering can have a number of dimensions, many of which can be relieved - for example, through the restoration of a particular relationship.

Further reading
