

# EUTHANASIA: 'Mercy' Killing or Murder?

Two recent incidents have spurred discussion over direct euthanasia ("mercy killing"), and passive euthanasia, the withholding of life supports in hopeless cases.

In one incident, in New Jersey, a young man paralyzed from the neck down because of a motorcycle accident, pleaded with his brother to kill him. According to police, the brother complied, fatally shooting the victim in the head. The brother has been charged with first-degree murder.

In the other, a Long Island, N.Y., physician allegedly injected a lethal dose of potassium chloride in a comatose cancer victim who had been given only two days to live. The patient died in five minutes. The local district attorney has charged the physician with murder.

No one seriously advocates the impulsive taking of life, as in the first case. It has been pointed out that a person suddenly crippled, even gravely, may yet show unpredictable improvement, or at least, regain a will to live.

But whether or not — as in the second case — to hasten the death of a fatally ill patient is a far subtler and more complex question.

Johns Hopkins professor Diana Crane has noted, "The nature of dying has changed qualitatively in recent years because of advances in medical knowledge and technology."

The advances in medical science have necessitated a new "definition" of death. For thousands of years, it had been accepted that death occurred when heart action and breathing ceased.

But now it is commonplace to restore palpitation to a heart that had fully stopped beating. Even when the natural capacity for cardiopulmonary activity is lost, these systems can be kept functioning through the aid of supplementary machinery.

Even in cases where the brain ceases to function first, heart and lung activity can be maintained artificially.

So, although legal definition of death lags far behind medical advances, the record shows a tendency among medical personnel to accept as the criterion of death, in most instances, the absence of brain activity for 24 hours.



Photo by Laurence E. Keefe

But, because modern medicines and machines can prolong a sort of life even in a comatose, terminally ill patient, sharp and agonizing questions can arise.

Should the patient be given a lethal injection or simply denied further medication or "life-prolonging" ministrations? Should positive action be taken to bring the life of the patient to a speedier close, or should there be "calculated benign neglect"?

In such a case, when the person

is "irretrievably inaccessible to human care," says Methodist theologian Paul Ramsey, "it is a matter of complete (ethical) indifference whether death gains the victory over the patient by direct or indirect action."

But Cardinal John Heenan of Westminster, England, who has described direct euthanasia as "Murder of suicide disguised in Greek idiom," voiced the traditional Roman Catholic position at a recent conference when he declared: "No private person has the right to destroy

life, whether his own or others'. Direct killing of the incurably sick, disabled, or insane is never justified."

At the same time, the cardinal expressed the Church's view in pointing out that "prolonged use of machines to maintain action of heart or lungs, though commonplace, would be regarded as extraordinary means of preserving life."

"In such circumstances," he said, "such means might, and perhaps ought to, be discontinued on ethical grounds."

It is no great secret, according to a New York Times editorial, that euthanasia is frequently practiced here and abroad. "Normally," said the editorial, "this takes the form of cessation of 'extraordinary measures' when all reasonable hope seems gone; it is the decision, for example, not to put the comatose patient in a respirator when he develops breathing difficulties."

But such a decision often has to be made in the face of uncertainties and ambiguities.

Doctors may disagree over a prognosis. A patient may be so depressed by pain that one day he wants out, while the next day, with some surcease of pain, he has a renewed desire to go on living.

Then there is the problem of heirs who may be thinking more of the inheritance than of the patient when the time "to pull the plug" is discussed.

Students of the problem feel that doctors will simply have to live with such blurred, gray areas, perhaps indefinitely. For this reason, Dr. Malcolm Todd, newly-elected president of the American Medical Association, wants physicians to have help at least in formulating a general policy.

He proposed a commission of laymen, clergy, lawyers, and medical personnel to make needed determinations. "Society has changed," he said. "It's up to society to decide."

Jesuit Father Richard McCormick of Loyola University's School of Theology in Chicago, in a recent interview, observed that there were cases where the line is hard to draw. A case in point: a Baltimore couple who let their mongoloid baby die of starvation by refusing permission for an operation to open his digestive tract.

"In cases like that," said Father McCormick, "you're passing judgment on what quality of life that person will have. And once you pass judgment that certain kinds of life are not worth living, the possible sequence is horrifying."

"In Nazi Germany, they went from mental defectives to political enemies to whole races of people. This kind of judgment leads to the kind of mentality that makes such things possible."

News Analysis by Religious News Service

**DEWITTE**  
the name you trust for  
**GAS HEAT**  
WILLIAMSON  
**JOHN A. DEWITTE, Inc.**  
45 Years Of Dependable Service  
73 WEBSTER AVE. 482-8888

**GALA'S SPAGHETTI HOUSE**  
"Famous for Sauce"  
**Friday Specials**

- BRASCIOLE (Stuffed Round Steak)
- LINGUINI with CALAMARI with CLAM SAUCE (Red or white)
- TRIPE

**American and Italian Cuisine**  
PARTY ROOM FACILITIES  
1832 EMPIRE BLVD. — AT CREEK ST.  
FOR RESERVATIONS—671-2600

EVERYONE IS WELCOME  
to  
**OUR LADY OF FATIMA SHRINE**  
Town of Lewiston,  
Youngstown, N.Y.  
for  
**THE CORONATION FEAST on**  
**SUNDAY, AUGUST 12, 1973**

2:30 P.M.—Religious Pageant on island  
4:00 P.M.—Solemn Rosary Procession, Crowning 13-foot statue on top of dome, Sermon and Benediction  
5:00 P.M.—Mass for pilgrims  
8:30 P.M.—Candlelight Rosary Procession