

The Dutch Way of Death; medical ethics in the Netherlands

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APPENDIX G

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Seven years ago, Dr. Niko Wolswinkel was asked to kill someone.

On a Monday morning that he will never forget, the Dutch physician's patient, a 77-year old woman dying from cancer, asked him to kill her.

As a purely legal matter, he knew he could do it. While euthanasia had not yet been officially decriminalized in the Netherlands--that happened earlier this month--in practice, it had. A string of high-profile court rulings in the 1980s made it nearly impossible for prosecutors to win euthanasia cases, and in the few instances in which doctors were convicted, their sentences were suspended. The Royal Dutch Medical Association had publicly approved of euthanasia, which was common even then. All that stood between euthanasia and his patient, Dr. Wolswinkel knew, was his own willingness to comply.

On that day, he searched his conscience. "It is very hard to speak of these things," Dr. Wolswinkel said, with a quiet sadness in his voice. "Thirty years ago, this was something that people didn't ask for."

He couldn't bring himself to kill his patient; doctors are supposed to be healers, not killers. And, as a Christian, he believed it was wrong to take into his hands the power of God. A few days later, his patient died naturally.

Most Dutchmen have come to a different conclusion; more than 80% favor "voluntary euthanasia," according to recent polls. The Dutch Parliament recently passed a measure completely decriminalizing euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide. The Netherlands is now the first democratic nation on earth to permit, under law, doctors to kill their patients.

And they may be accustomed to doing so. Of the 130,000 Dutchmen who died in 1990, some 11,800 were killed or helped to die by their doctors, according to a 1991 report by the attorney general of the High Council of the Netherlands. (The 1991 report is the only complete report on euthanasia practices by the Dutch government.)

Some of these deaths are the classic cases cited by right-to-die advocates: A terminally ill patient, in agony, demanding to "die with dignity." But many are not. An estimated 5,981 people--an average of 16 per day--were killed by their doctors without their consent, according to the Dutch government report.

And these numbers do not measure several other groups that are put to death involuntarily: disabled infants, terminally ill children and mental patients. Some 8% of all infants who die in the Netherlands are killed by their doctors, according to a 1997 study published in the *Lancet*, a British medical journal. Consider the case of Dr. Henk Pins, who killed--with her parents' consent--a three-day old girl with spina bifida and an open wound at the base of her spine. Dr. Prins never made any attempt to treat the wound, according to Wesley J. Smith, author of the book *Culture of Death*. The treatment was death. Euthanasia critics have talked about the "slippery slope" as a possibility; in the Netherlands, it is a fact.

Many old people now fear Dutch hospitals. More than 10% of senior citizens who responded to a recent survey, which did not mention euthanasia, volunteered that they feared being killed by their doctors without their consent. One senior-citizen group printed up wallet cards that tell doctors that the cardholder opposes euthanasia.

What makes the Dutch comfortable with euthanasia? One factor is that their doctors became comfortable with it. "The Dutch have got so far so fast because right from the beginning, they have had the medical profession on their side," Derek Humphry, founder of the Hemlock Society, told the *Toronto Globe and Mail* last September. "Until we get a significant part of the medical profession on our side, we won't get very far."

Some suggest that Dutch doctors are naturally more inclined toward euthanasia. That seems unlikely. In contrast to the physicians of every other Nazi-occupied country, Dutch doctors never recommended or participated in a single euthanasia during World War II, according to a 1949 *New England Journal of Medicine* article. Even Nazi orders not to treat the old or those with little chance of recovery were disobeyed. It only took a generation, essayist Malcolm Muggeridge noted, "to transform a war crime into an act of compassion."

How did Dutch doctors change their thinking so dramatically in the space of one lifetime?

The path to the death culture began when doctors learned to think like accountants. As the cost of socialized medicine in the Netherlands grew, doctors were lectured about the importance of keeping expenses down. In many hospitals, signs were posted indicating how much old-age treatments cost taxpayers. The result was a growing "social pressure" from doctors and others, says Arno Heltzel, a spokesman for the Catholic Union of the Elderly, the largest Dutch senior-citizen group, which favors voluntary euthanasia. "Old people have to excuse themselves for living. When they say that all of their friends are dead, people say, 'Maybe it is time for you to go too,' rather than, 'You need to find new friends.'"

With such pressure, even the "voluntary" euthanasia cases many not be truly consensual. Add to that the remarkable 33% drop in elderly suicides with an almost equal rise in euthanasia in the same age group over the past two decades. What Dr. Herbert Hendin, a euthanasia opponent, calls "the Dutch cure for suicide" may simply be evidence of untreated depression. But treatment is costly.

Professional restrictions against euthanasia were cast aside. The Hippocratic Oath, a 2,500-year old credo meant to curb ancient temptations, includes the pledge: "I will not give a fatal draught to anyone if I am asked, nor will I suggest any such thing." Few medical schools in any developed

nation require the oath. Other professional codes have been rewritten to be neutral or supportive of euthanasia.

Medical school curricula and professional standards were changed, too. Nearly every major medical school offers a bioethics class in which euthanasia is considered, at least, an open question. Euthanasia is now an option, not a taboo. The Dutch Pediatric Society issued guidelines for killing infants in 1993; the Royal Dutch Society of Pharmacology sends a book to all new doctors that includes formulas for euthanasia-inducing poisons.

Then came the bogus ethicists. Many of these "medical ethics experts" are drawn from or influenced by the global pro-death subculture--the World Federation of Right-to-Die Societies lists 36 groups in 21 countries--that stretches from Australia's Dr. Phillip Nitschke ("Dr. Death") to Princeton University's Peter Singer. Many of them are doctors. "They can be very charming", said Rita L. Marker, executive director of the International Anti-Euthanasia Task force. They can also be very influential; they seemed to have shaped the thinking of the Dutch health minister, Els Borst. Ms. Borst, who is 69, recently called for a suicide pill for healthy but "bored" old people.

Over time, euthanasia came to be seen as normal. When I phoned Amsterdam's Academic Medical Center, a spokeswoman told me that she approved of involuntary euthanasia for disabled infants: "It is the same in all the hospitals in the world; we are just more open about it." Most hospitals try heroically to save disabled children, but the contrary view seems to be widely held among the Dutch.

Finally, the feckless politicians enter the frame. There is no major party unequivocally opposed to euthanasia in principle, not even the right-of-center Christian Democrats, who have shared power for most of the postwar period. "There is no broad opposition to euthanasia, even in the Christian circles," laments Kars Veling, a member of Parliament who will lead the Christian Union party next year.

After speaking to a packed party meeting in Spakenburg, Mr. Veling soberly talks about watching his father die. The old man was suffering terribly. "We prayed for the Lord to take him," he said. The doctor offered a lethal injection. It was hard to say no, he said, but his father had never asked for death and such an end would have been contrary to the values by which he lived.

Dutch doctors are free to make such fatal offers. Every legal and professional barrier to euthanasia has been demolished, often by doctors themselves. Euthanasia began with doctors, and only an awakening of their conscience can stop it now.