

EUTHANASIA

Euthanasia is a huge issue that regularly hits our newspapers and TV screens. As nurses we could easily find ourselves right on the front-line of this debate as we meet different viewpoints and practices on the ward. We need to be able to explain clearly and compassionately, from a biblical perspective, what we, as Christians believe about life and death, something which is often a very emotional subject.

Helpful definitions

Euthanasia taken literally from the Greek means 'well death'. Perhaps a clearer definition is:

The intentional killing by act or omission of a person whose life is felt not to be worth living.

- *Active euthanasia*
Person killed by someone else's action.
- *Passive euthanasia*
Person killed by someone else's omission.
- *Voluntary euthanasia*
When a person asks to die.
- *Involuntary euthanasia*
When a competent person is not asked.
- *Non-voluntary euthanasia*
When a person who is not competent of making a decision is killed.

To understand what the Bible has to say about this, it is helpful to look at 3 key issues:

1. Who is in charge of life and death?
2. What does it mean to care with compassion?
3. What happens to us when we die?

Unfortunately, there is not room to unpack them all here, but hopefully the following is enough to start you thinking.

Who is in charge?

One of the main arguments for euthanasia is that we each have the right to decide when and to some extent, how we die, and it is wrong to deny a person that right. We are each in control of our own lives. However, Psalm 24:1 says:

The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it.

The psalmist here is saying that we belong to God, and the implication of this is that God is in control and not us. This perspective is clarified in Psalm 139. In verses 13-16 we see that we have been created by a God who not only knows us intimately because he formed us at our most vulnerable, but who is in absolute charge of our lives. Verse 16 tells us that

all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

From this we can begin to see that for a man to take his own life, or for someone else to do it for him is wrong. God alone is the author of life. It is his job alone to write the beginning and the ending of our lives. In Jeremiah 10:23 we read:

I know O LORD, that a man's life is not his own; it is not for a man to direct his steps.

In Genesis 9:6 we get another perspective on why the taking of human life is morally wrong – it is because we are made in God's image; we are his representatives and his reflection on earth. To kill a human being is to make a statement about God, about our regard for God. The taking of any human life is to exert human independence from God, to disregard God and to place ourselves in control. However, as we will see when we look at what happens after death, the fact that we attempt to exert control over the manner of our dying is only an illusion. We cannot alter the fact that ultimately God is sovereign. We might choose to ignore him and to deny him but we cannot alter the fact of him.

Care with Compassion

That is not to say, however, that we serve a God who abandons us to suffering and death, a far and distant God who neither understands or cares. If we look at the life and death of Jesus Christ we can see that our God is no stranger to suffering. We have the greatest truth of all, as we know that nothing can separate us from God's love (Romans 8:38-39). He enters into suffering with us, right up to the point of death and beyond. As Hebrews 4:14-16 indicates, Jesus is able to sympathise with all our weaknesses, and in the midst of suffering we are undoubtedly at our most vulnerable to temptation. Jesus knew what it was to suffer - just read the Gospel accounts of his death - and because of this we can look to him to find mercy and grace to help us in our times of need.

God is not deaf to our cries of anguish. In Exodus 2:24-25, God heard the anguished cries of the Israelites suffering in their slavery and he had compassion on them. Furthermore, in 2 Corinthians 1:3, God is described as the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort; he is the one who rescues from death, not who delivers people up to death. We need to demonstrate God's compassion and give him opportunity to show his compassion, and this does not happen by hastening death – this is never God's solution to anything. Death is always a punishment and never the face of compassion.

As nurses, there are 3 ways we can respond to people dying:

1. Try and ignore it.
2. Support decisions to hasten death because of the suffering.
3. Go Christ's way and enter into the suffering by walking with them to the end, showing compassion and meeting their needs as they present.

What happens when we die?

If we look at Genesis, at how and why suffering and death entered our world (Gen 2: 15-17 and 3:1-24), we begin to see that death is actually neither a choice or a right, but a punishment, the consequences of our rebellion against God. There is a very real sense in which there is no such thing as a 'good death', for death itself is bad. Jesus in John 11:33 is deeply troubled at the presence and effects of death in the world. For us then to welcome death, and to talk of a good death is at odds with the way Jesus saw death.

However, there is hope in death, and that is a subtly different thing. In John 5:19-30, Jesus talks about what happens after we die. He says that there will come a day when we will all rise out of our earthly graves – some to eternal life and some to eternal condemnation. The key to our eternal destiny rests in verse 24. Those who hear and believe in Jesus as the Son of God will spend eternity in God's presence, and those who don't will suffer eternal punishment. This judgement is repeated in John 3:36.

Judgement is not a popular concept today in an environment where each person is considered the arbiter of their own destiny, but the Bible says it is a reality. Hebrews 11:27 says that man is destined to die once and after that to face judgement, and Revelation 20:11:15 offers a graphic picture of that coming judgement day. Of course there is an extent to which it is true that each person is the arbiter of their own destiny. The difference though is that there are only two choices – trusting in Jesus' death on your behalf and receiving eternal life, or rejecting the gospel and facing eternal condemnation.

There are many misconceptions about death. A popular opinion is reflected in a line I heard in a film once: 'nothing is certain until you're dead and even then I'm sure God negotiates'. Many people seem to think that they can bargain and plead their cause with God, but Revelation 20:12 tells us that judgement is fixed and based on what we have done as recorded in the book of life. We cannot bargain with God, and of course the all important action is whether we have put our trust in Jesus or not. The idea that we get second chances is also expressed in the idea of previous or future lives, yet Hebrews 11:27 is quite clear that man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgement.

What relevance does all this have on the euthanasia debate? Well many people make the call for euthanasia because they see death as a release from suffering. However as we have seen, death is only a release from suffering if you trust in Jesus. If not, death is the gateway to eternal suffering, far worse than anything that this life has to offer. Euthanasia robs people of the final opportunity to cry out to God for help and rescue and is an expression of the original sin of Adam and Eve – the desire to be in control, to call the shots, to be like God. Conceptually, euthanasia presents death as a positive thing, whereas we know that it is not. There is little place in the euthanasia debate for capturing Jesus' response to his own impending death. The prospect of facing God's

wrath and separation from his eternal Father in order to spare us from such eternal separation caused Jesus such anguish that his sweat fell like drops of blood (Luke 22:42-44). Yet the object of euthanasia is to remove pain and suffering by welcoming death as a friend, with no regard as to the pain and suffering of separation from God which lies beyond death for those who don't trust in Christ.

There is much more that can be said on this topic, but hopefully this has given you a place to start. Other useful resources on Euthanasia can be found on the Christian Medical Fellowship web site www.cmf.org.uk

Matters of Life and Death by John Wyatt also has an excellent chapter on Euthanasia set in the context of a book examining ethics and the sovereignty of God.

Questions for discussion:

1. What is God's view of death and the deliberate taking of human life? What implication does this have for the way we view euthanasia?
Genesis 9:6
Exodus 19:13
1 Corinthians 15:26
Deuteronomy 22:8
John 5:19-30
Revelation 20:11-15
2. In the Bible, suicide is always associated with folly, godlessness and sinful pride. Look at the ways these qualities are seen in the following passages. How do they add to our understanding of the morality of euthanasia?
Judges 9:52-55
1 Samuel 31:1-6
2 Samuel 17:23
Matthew 27:5
3. What are some of the reasons people request euthanasia and some healthcare workers support it?
4. What are some of the dangers if euthanasia is legalised?
5. What popular perspectives on death and dying can blind people to the evil of euthanasia?
6. When confronted with euthanasia how might we set about presenting the gospel to:
 - a) patients
 - b) our colleagues