

Anesthesiology
79:404, 1993
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Euthanasia in the Intensive Care Unit

To the Editor:—In their article, Truog and Berde¹ adopted the subtle distinction between “nonvoluntary” euthanasia (according to a surrogate’s decision) and “involuntary” euthanasia (without a competent person’s consent). They further stated that involuntary euthanasia has no ethical merit. Though everyone is (and should be) concerned about possible abuses, I personally find these clear-cut statements too short, especially when they apply to the incompetent, terminally ill patient.

In the intensive care unit (ICU), the decision to forgo treatment often involves patients who are comatose because of extensive brain damage or diffuse encephalopathy. In these circumstances, the distinction between the withdrawal of life support and/or the administration of large doses of sedative agents generally becomes tenuous. As an example, rather than wean from the respirator a patient who cannot breathe spontaneously (terminal weaning) and then administer opioids to relieve discomfort, is it not more appropriate medically to administer the medications while maintaining mechanical ventilation, so as to avoid any possible discomfort? This could be a matter of personal opinion.

An inquiry among European intensivists revealed that 36% (87 of 242) of the responders practiced euthanasia in patients with no real chance of recovering a meaningful life. Euthanasia was practiced more commonly by younger doctors; it was practiced less commonly in the South of Europe (and, in general, by Catholic rather than by non-Catholic physicians); but it was not more common in the Netherlands than in other European countries.²

Thus, euthanasia is practiced regularly in many ICUs for patients who did not explicitly request it. An important question is whether the surrogates should be involved in these decisions. Many European

intensivists would say no, because the surrogates lack the appropriate medical knowledge and expertise. Moreover, these decisions may raise deep feelings at a later time. Many believe that the physician can represent the patient’s best interests without seeking a surrogate’s approval.³

May I emphasize that what American courts decide as acceptable is not necessarily what is universally appropriate on ethical grounds. In more general terms, legal issues and ethical issues should be kept distinct.

Jean-Louis Vincent, M.D., Ph.D.
Department of Intensive Care
Erasmé University Hospital
Free University of Brussels
Route de Lennik 808
B-1070 Brussels, Belgium

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(Accepted for publication May 6, 1993.)

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In Reply:—Our purpose was to write a balanced critique of the euthanasia movement in the United States and to emphasize that greater involvement by anesthesiologists in pain management could diminish the perceived need for legalized euthanasia. We agree with Barnette, Wendling, and Heath that legalization of assisted suicide or euthanasia would present many serious problems. We are troubled by the intolerant and dogmatic tone of these letters, however. Good

arguments and good reasons exist on both sides of this debate. Patients are legitimately concerned about the lack of attention that medicine has paid to comforting the dying. They are asking for more control over decision-making than the medical profession has been willing to give them. It is one thing to believe, as we do, that this is not the time to legalize euthanasia. It is quite another to refuse to acknowledge the reasonableness of those who believe otherwise. To do so is