

# Euthanasia - a moral debate

The dictionary definition of euthanasia states that it is;  
'gentle, painless death; putting to death in this way, especially to relieve suffering.'

Therefore, **euthanasia** is causing a death to happen, usually because someone is suffering from a painful and incurable disease or injury. In this country, euthanasia is illegal. It is illegal to help someone to die even if they ask you to. Doctors **are** allowed to withdraw medication that is keeping someone alive, but they are **not** allowed to give doses of medication to cause death in that way.

## Methods of Euthanasia

**VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA** – euthanasia is performed because the dying person has asked for it.

For example; a woman who is dying of cancer has asked doctors to give her a drug that will kill her quickly.

**INVOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA** – euthanasia is performed without the dying person being told.

For example; a teenage boy is in a coma after a road accident. Only machines will keep him alive. Doctors decide to do nothing to save him, so they let him die. The boy cannot give his permission as he is in a coma.

**PASSIVE EUTHANASIA** – doctors give a painkilling drug but do nothing to save the patient.

For example; a young girl has cancer; the pain can be controlled but she will not get better. Doctors give her painkilling drugs but do not try to make her life last any longer.

**ACTIVE EUTHANASIA** - doctors give the patient a drug to take the pain away knowing that the drug will also kill the patient.

For example; a young man has cancer; the pain can be controlled but he will not get better. Doctors give him a drug that will take the pain away but it will also kill him.

**COMPULSORY EUTHANASIA** – euthanasia has to be performed because a person has a certain illness or has reached a certain age.

For example; an old man of 80 can do nothing for himself. Imagine that there is a law which states that he has to be destroyed because of this. **NO country allows compulsory euthanasia.**

**SOME OF THE BASIC QUESTIONS ARE:-  
IS EUTHANASIA RIGHT OR WRONG? AND,  
SHOULD CERTAIN KINDS OF EUTHANASIA BE ALLOWED?**

**Some Medical Issues**

- If a doctor gives a patient a drug with the intention of killing the person, then he has committed a crime.
- There are certain illnesses that doctors do not fully understand, a person may an unexpected recovery from an illness that a doctor thought they would die from.
- When doctor's become doctor's they have to make a promise, it is called the **Hippocratic oath**. A part of the promise is that they must not harm any of their patients, and ultimately the role of a doctor is to preserve life, not take it away.



Doctors have rejected euthanasia since the fifth century BC, when physicians first took the **Oath of Hippocrates** and swore, 'to give no deadly medicine to anyone if asked, nor suggest any such counsel'.

People may argue that the Nazi extermination programme is a recent and terrible example of what can happen once we give the state the power to kill innocent human beings.

This is a picture of a medical team working to save a life. Isn't this what doctor's are trained to do, and not to take life?

- Doctors and nurses may feel very unhappy about having to carry out euthanasia, even if it is what the sick person wishes.
- If euthanasia was allowed, people may become worried that the decision could be made by a doctor to end their life if they became too sick, as it would be easier than keeping them alive.

## Arguments FOR

- We should be able to choose how to die.
- Euthanasia lessens the pain for the patient.
- People should not have to live if they have no chance of getting better.
- It stops the suffering of relatives watching the patient die a slow and painful death.
- The health you have in life is more important than the length.
- It is cheaper to let dying patients die than to keep them alive with expensive drugs.
- If it were made legal, it would stop doctors breaking the law when they let someone die on purpose.
- A life of pain and suffering can be as bad as dying.
- It gets rid of people who are no longer useful.

## Arguments AGAINST

- It is unnecessary when there are painkilling drugs.
- The dying person may not be able to think clearly enough to make a proper decision.
- It could be abused.
- Patients may not trust doctors to keep them alive.
- People could be talked into euthanasia for the wrong reasons.
- Euthanasia is no better than murder.
- It is not fair to expect doctors to kill patients.
- There are special places for the terminally ill to be cared for and to die peacefully, so there is no need for euthanasia.
- If the patient is unable to choose, then who decides?
- Mistakes can happen.

### A religious point of view

From a religious point of view, euthanasia is morally wrong and should not be considered no matter what the circumstances. To intentionally end someone else's life is a sin and it breaks one of the Ten Commandments; 'Thou shall not kill.' God can only decide to end a person's life, and no human has the right to 'play God'. This point of view does not allow for personal decisions about ones own life, nor does it consider the pain and suffering a person may be going through.

### Write the questions in your books and answer giving FULL answers.

1. What does the word euthanasia mean?
2. List each of the methods of euthanasia and write a brief description of what it means.
3. What is the Hypocratic Oath?
4. Do you think it is fair to expect a doctor or nurse to assist in euthanasia? Give the reasons for your answer.
5. Write down what you think are the five most important arguments **for** euthanasia and write down the most important five **against** euthanasia. Explain **why** you have chosen these arguments.
6. What would a strict Christian think of euthanasia and why?
7. What would Muslim believers think of euthanasia and why?
8. Do you think certain kinds of euthanasia are ethically better than others? Why?

**You are on a government committee who are deciding whether or not to make euthanasia legal. Read the following real-life articles and write down your arguments for or against. Think about how you would feel if you were in the same situation as one of the people below, but also base your argument on whether legalising euthanasia would benefit society as a whole. You must consider the issues already discussed and don't forget we are in a country that has Christian ethics, would the majority of the population of Britain accept your decision?**

*Coma patient's experience highlights danger of euthanasia*

After an accident left Joan Smith (not her real name) in a coma, she was completely paralyzed but could hear all that was going on around her. According to the 42-year-old business woman, "I could hear the doctors discussing me, so I knew how ill I was. I heard them saying that my lungs were full of poison and there wasn't much hope." "Twice a priest came into the room and gave me the last rites," she said.

Her biggest shock, however, came while she was on a respirator and she heard her husband telling the doctors that the respirator should be turned off because his wife would not want to live under these circumstances. "My husband was issuing my death sentence—I wanted to scream," she recalled, but couldn't. It was only because of her daughter's persistence that her treatment continued, allowing her to fully recover. [*The Sunday London Times*, 12/15/98]

---

In March 1993 **Anthony Bland** had lain in persistent vegetative state for three years before a Court Order allowed his degradation and indignity to come to a merciful close. The judges said that if he had made a living will expressing his future wishes he could have been allowed to die in peace earlier

---

In 1992 **Dr Cox** openly defied the law and assented to 70 year old Mrs Boyes' persistent request for voluntary active euthanasia. Mrs Boyes' was so ill that she "screamed like a dog" if anyone touched her. Conventional medicine did not relieve her agony. In her last days, when she repeatedly requested to die, Dr Cox finally gave her an injection of potassium chloride, bestowing on her the boon of a peaceful death so many of us feel we are entitled to. Dr Cox, although given a suspended sentence, was hauled through the courts like a common criminal. We believe good doctors acting in all conscience like Dr Cox, should be lauded, not vilified, and should have the benefit of legally approved codes of conduct that embody consistent safeguards against abuse. Together we should ensure that medicine and the law serve the patient and the citizen once more.

---

**Sue Rodriguez**, a mother in her early thirties, died slowly of Lou Gehrig's disease. She lived for several years with the knowledge that her muscles would, one by one, waste away until the day came when, fully conscious, she would choke to death. She begged the Courts to reassure her that a doctor would be allowed to assist her in choosing the moment of death. They refused. She lived on in terror, helped eventually by a doctor who, in February 1994, covertly broke the law to help her die in peace. A law on assisted suicide with rigorous safeguards could have saved her the nightmare during those months before her death, given her the confidence to carry on - with the reassurance that when it got too bad she could rely on a compassionate doctor to follow her wishes at the end.