

*Private Members' Business*

death. Consideration of this flip side, the quality of death, gives rise to our discussion of euthanasia.

I think most Canadians think that we as a society need to seriously consider the legalization of euthanasia, and such consideration, as I said, has become unavoidable because of the accomplishments of medical science.

What is euthanasia? The meaning of the word is "good death." However, the meaning has become much more complex. The Ontario Medical Association, for example, has defined euthanasia as being an act of actively assisting to die the patient who has requested that his or her death be hastened. This definition perhaps provides no hint to the emotionally charged nature of this morally frustrating, ethically confusing issue which demands our attention.

Perhaps a better definition is one which defines euthanasia as signifying the termination of life when the quality of life as defined by the patient has degenerated to the point of meaninglessness, when the illness has reached a stage beyond the help of any physician.

A distinction is often drawn between passive and active euthanasia, with passive euthanasia being acceptable while active euthanasia is not.

This argument holds that passive euthanasia, allowing individuals to die by withholding or ceasing comprehensive medical treatment, is not the same as active euthanasia, some positive act which leads to death, such as the administration of a lethal dose of a drug.

In short, the argument asserts that somehow the latter is killing while the former is not. I think really there is no distinction morally between passive and active euthanasia, since the intention is the same.

There is another important question to be asked: is there a moral difference between physicians who assist patients in dying through their purposeful decision of non-action and physicians who assist patients in dying by administering a lethal dose of medication? Again I say that for physicians, the answer must be no, provided that either scenario takes place in accordance with the expressed wishes of the patient.

The issue of significance is whether the circumstances of euthanasia are voluntary or involuntary. We are limiting our discussion to voluntary euthanasia. It seems to me that voluntary euthanasia rests on a fundamental

human right, the right to die if death is the only release from suffering.

Surely the right to choose to die is a very important demonstration of individual freedom, but no individual has the right to advocate it for another. Clearly voluntary euthanasia is not killing. It is physician aid in dying. Involuntary euthanasia on the other hand is in no uncertain terms murder.

• (1810)

When I state that I support the legalization of euthanasia, I am saying that a patient who is fully cognizant of all the facts regarding his or her diagnosis and prognosis should be able to request the aid of a physician in achieving his or her own death should they so choose. That is the first point of Bill C-261, that a person should have the right to make this choice in circumstances of an irreversible medical condition.

My second point is with regard to protecting physicians who assist. The law should be changed so as to permit physicians to fulfil such requests of their patients. In Canada we saw the partial acknowledgement of each individual's right to determine the circumstances of their own death when the act of suicide was decriminalized.

By not decriminalizing aiding and abetting suicide, we are preventing some members of our society from exercising this right and instead are sentencing them to lingering, painful deaths. The right to control one's own dying process, to die with dignity, needs to be accepted in our legal system and physicians who assist patients' wishes need to be free from any fear of criminal responsibility.

Should euthanasia become legalized in this country, clearly relevant laws must be carefully constructed. The rights of all individuals need to be enshrined within such legislation and the legislation must guarantee the freedom of choice to every Canadian. It must grant those with irreversible medical conditions the right to die with dignity and it must also provide medical professionals with the right to choose not to participate.

The key concept here, it seems to me, is choice. By legalizing euthanasia within clearly defined guidelines, all Canadians can be provided with the opportunity to choose euthanasia or not. By not legalizing it, many Canadians will be forced into the only option available, one which otherwise they would not choose.