

Touched

I was certainly “touched” by the article by Dr Meredith McKague in the March 2010 issue.¹ As has happened so many times before, it took me back to an incident many years ago when I was a relatively young FP. I was visiting a child who was quite obviously nearing the end of his young life. After seeing him, I went out into the corridor where his mother was softly weeping. There seemed to be nothing to say. Words are so often both unnecessary and intrusive. I put my arms around her. In a few moments, she straightened up, softly thanked me, and went in to be with her child.

As I left the ward, I was stopped by the head nurse, who proceeded to give me a talking-to for embracing the young mother. She told me, in no uncertain terms, that it was unprofessional. I didn’t respond; those were the days when the head nurse of a ward was definitely the Big Chief.

There are always exceptions to regulations. I dare to hope that we have outlived those days and are paying more attention to the needs of a young mother than the assumed propriety of hospital personnel—no matter how important he or she might be.

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Reference

1. McKague M. Touch. *Can Fam Physician* 2010;56:263.

We can do better than euthanasia—we must

Dr Boisvert is wrong.¹ Doctors should not be open to euthanasia and assisted suicide as solutions to our patients’ suffering.

Behind the fears of existential suffering or becoming a burden to loved ones or feelings of hopelessness and worthlessness, there is a call for help to find meaning even in the midst of such suffering.

When death becomes the answer, we as human beings have lost the opportunity to go beyond our limitations, try harder, and offer hope to these people. Agreeing with assisted suicide is an affirmation that, depending on the circumstances, some lives are not worth living and need to be terminated. At a recent American Psychosocial Oncology Society conference, researchers presented evidence that medical personnel were among some of the most important sources of hope for patients. Mother Teresa used to say that “the feeling of unwantedness, especially from those who are supposed to love and care about us, is the worst threat to our human dignity.”²

Amid these overwhelming fears, a free, autonomous decision about euthanasia is an illusion. The troubles of human relationships within families become

accentuated, and problems of physician error and abuse in an already stressed medical system abound. It would be difficult to ensure that the choice of suicide is freely made and adequately informed.

Eventually, society will not be able to defend the most vulnerable from abuse, and doctors will become death dealers instead of healers. Despite Dr Boisvert’s assertions to the contrary, countries where euthanasia is legal have suffered from it. Els Borst-Eilers, who served as Health Minister for the Netherlands from 1994 to 2002 and who is a doctor herself, proposed the country’s infamous euthanasia bill. Now, however, she thinks the government acted too soon, to the detriment of palliative care.³ Even the United Nations Human Rights Committee is concerned by the extent of euthanasia and assisted suicides in the Netherlands: a physician can terminate a patient’s life without any independent review by a judge or magistrate to guarantee that the decision was not the subject of undue influence or misapprehension, second opinions can be obtained from a telephone hot-line, and there is no prior judicial review of physicians’ decisions to terminate patients’ lives in circumstances in which the patients are not able to make the request themselves.⁴

Euthanasia takes us in the wrong direction. It distorts patient-doctor relationships, leaves physicians off the hook too easily in challenging situations, violates health professionals’ moral autonomy, and dehumanizes physicians as they become executioners. We can do better than euthanasia—we must.

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References

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3. Caldwell S. Now the Dutch turn against legalised mercy killing. *Daily Mail* 2009 Dec 9. Available from: www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1234295/Now-Dutch-turn-legalised-mercy-killing.html#ixzz0lj4ZGChX. Accessed 2010 May 11.

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