

Chapitre 39 : Euthanasia

As early as the 13th century, English writer Roger Bacon claimed medicine would prolong life indefinitely. Today, as people live longer, many wish for an early death because they suffer from painful diseases. That raises the thorny concept of euthanasia : to induce the painless death of a person for merciful reasons. But it is an infringement on the Hippocratic Oath stippling that doctors “will give no deadly medicine to any one if asked”.

Three classes of euthanasia can be distinguished :

Active euthanasia	Passive euthanasia	Physician-assisted suicide
Doctor injects a lethal substance to a patient	Doctor withdraw the treatment of a patient	Doctor supplies the patient with drugs necessary to shorten his life

Until the 1980s, euthanasia has been widely prohibited, but two cases brought the issue to the forefront :

Karen Ann Quilan who lapsed into a persistent vegetative state after taking a tranquilizer with some alcohol. Her family gained the right to unplug her respirator but she remained alive during 10 years in a coma before dying.

Nancy Cruzan who lost her brain function after a car accident and has been kept alive by doctors thanks to a feeding tube during 7 years. Court ruled to stop artificial feeding and she died later the same month.

In 1997, Oregon voters approved the “Death with Dignity Act”, which allows doctors to prescribe lethal doses of drugs to terminally ill patients wishing to die, thus making Oregon the first state to legalize doctor-assisted suicide.

In United Kingdom, common law refers to suicide as “self-murder” and it became decriminalized only in 1961. Between 1936 and 2003, 8 bills or amendments which tried to modify the law to allow faster death failed. In 2009, the House of Lord delivered a rule stating that England would have to clarify its assisted-suicide law, especially as regards the possible prosecution of anyone helping another person to end his life. However, assisting-suicide remains illegal.

One of the difficulties lies in clearly defining “terminally ill”. Another lies in the lack of medical insurance because the high medical treatment cost prompt people to see euthanasia as a cheap solution.