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'Death with dignity' can take away choice

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Last month, England moved one small step closer to legalizing assisted suicide. When Debbie Purdy took her case to the highest court in the U.K. she wanted clarification of the law: Would her husband be punished upon his return to England if he accompanied her to Switzerland, where she would get assistance to commit suicide?

The verdict is that the law needs to be clarified -- and that returning family of suicide tourists should be told whether they will face punishment or not.

And so it goes. Purdy is ecstatic about the decision, telling reporters "We've got our lives back."

Does being able to plan your own death mean getting to live a better life? So often, the ability to have help in death is framed as increasing choice and freedom. In reality, legalized assisted suicide is all about giving doctors control, even making choices for patients, without any repercussion.

This has been the case in the Netherlands, where the supreme court permitted euthanasia/assisted suicide in some cases in 1984.

Numerous reviews and studies have tracked the issue since then. A government-commissioned report by an independent committee revealed that in 1990, of 2,700 people killed by euthanasia/assisted suicide, fully 1,000 died without making any explicit request. Another study revealed something similar; in 2005 alone, 546 people died not by their choice but by that of their doctors.

Another 1993 report about death in Holland confirms that doctor choice is critical. The authors state that doctors are themselves "moral agents, not simply instruments of the patient's will." This remains true in cases where a doctor denies requests for euthanasia as well, of course.

But more troubling is the reverse scenario, where "life might justifiably be terminated without the patient's request," something this report suggests is both important and necessary.

One can imagine these statistics are actually higher, considering the doctors themselves are responsible for reporting.

With regards to baby euthanasia (also known as infanticide), a national survey showed 15 to 20 infants were killed annually. However, only three were noted officially on death certificates.

Of course, proponents of assisted suicide will point to jurisdictions like Oregon as proof that legalized euthanasia/assisted suicide can be problem-free. But we cannot be so sure of Oregon as a death success story.

Oregon's Death with Dignity Act came into force in 1997 and since then there hasn't been as much research into the effects as we saw in the Netherlands. Sure, there are annual reports, but physicians still control the data, and there have been numerous complaints that doctor-assisted deaths are underreported, and the reports are influenced by the euthanasia lobby.

In Washington state, with the very recent legalization of assisted suicide in 2008, doctors must lie about cause of death officially. If a doctor just provided a lethal dose of drugs, which a person with cancer then ingested to die, the certificate still must read "cancer," not assisted suicide.

In this case, it's hard to know what is better: extreme efforts to measure how people were killed (Holland has five regional committees of three people each tracking death) or this more lackadaisical attitude. Either way, only doctors know.

Today in Canada too, there is a private member's bill on the order paper to legalize assisted suicide. Though it won't likely pass in a minority parliament, it's the third attempt, and the issue is bound to come up again. In Canada, given the precarious financial situation of our medical system, the shortages and the waiting lists, it is not unreasonable to assume that dying early will save money, a bed, and allow a doctor to care for someone else.

Assisted suicide and euthanasia are not about individual human rights. They are about putting power into a doctor's hands, and to what end? Giving the legal option of assisted suicide offers the "right to die" to the few who want it, but the power given to doctors could leave many more pressured or even forced to die against their will.

It's not clear how the British government will decide in response to the Purdy case. She and her husband may sleep well knowing they're one step closer to changing the law in Britain, but it's not clear the rest of us should sleep so soundly.

*Derek Miedema is a researcher at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada,
www.imfcanada.org*