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WHAT IS EUTHANASIA?

Euthanasia is the termination of a very sick person's life in order to relieve them of their suffering.

A person who undergoes euthanasia usually has an incurable condition. But there are other instances where some people want their life to be ended.

In many cases, it is carried out at the person's request but there are times when they may be too ill and the decision is made by relatives, medics or, in some instances, the courts.

The term is derived from the Greek word "euthanatos"which means easy death.

The issue has been at the centre of very heated debates for many years and is surrounded by religious, ethical and practical considerations.

The ethics of euthanasia

Euthanasia raises a number of agonising moral dilemmas:

* is it ever right to end the life of a terminally ill patient who is undergoing severe pain and suffering?
* under what circumstances can euthanasia be justifiable, if at all?
* is there a moral difference between killing someone and letting them die?

At the heart of these arguments are the different ideas that people have about the meaning and value of human existence.

Should human beings have the right to decide on issues of life and death?

There are also a number of arguments based on practical issues.

Some people think that euthanasia shouldn't be allowed, even if it was morally right, because it could be abused and used as a cover for murder.

Killing or letting die

Euthanasia can be carried out either by taking actions , including giving a lethal injection, or by not doing what is necessary to keep a person alive (such as failing to keep their feeding tube going).

'Extraordinary' medical care

It is not euthanasia if a patient dies as a result of refusing extraordinary  or burdensome medical treatment .

Euthanasia and pain relief

It's not euthanasia to give a drug in order to reduce pain, even though the drug causes the patient to die sooner. This is because the doctor's intention was to relieve the pain, not to kill the patient. This argument is sometimes known as the Doctrine of Double effect .

Mercy killing

Very often people call euthanasia 'mercy killing', perhaps thinking of it for someone who is terminally ill and suffering prolonged, unbearable pain.

Why people want euthanasia

Most people think unbearable pain is the main reason people seek euthanasia, but some surveys in the USA and the Netherlands showed that less than a third of requests for euthanasia were because of severe pain.

Terminally ill people can have their quality of life severely damaged by physical conditions such as incontinence, nausea and vomiting, breathlessness, paralysis and difficulty in swallowing.

Psychological factors that cause people to think of euthanasia include depression, fearing loss of control or dignity, feeling a burden, or dislike of being dependent.