11.6: Euthanasia

Euthanasia, or helping a person fulfill their wish to die, can happen in two ways: voluntary euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. Voluntary euthanasia refers to helping someone fulfill their wish to die by acting in such a way to help that person’s life end. This can be passive euthanasia such as no longer feeding someone or giving them food. Or it can be active euthanasia such as administering a lethal dose of medication to someone who wishes to die.

Physician-Assisted Suicide: Physician-assisted suicide occurs when a physician prescribes the means by which a person can end his or her own life. Physician-assisted suicide is legal in Oregon, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Belgium. The Oregon Death with Dignity Act of 1997 grants physicians this right. Physician-assisted suicides, however, are rare.
A growing number of the population support physician-assisted suicide. In 2000, a ruling of the U. S. Supreme Court upheld the right of states to determine their laws on physician-assisted suicide despite efforts to limit physicians’ ability to prescribe barbiturates and opiates for their patients requesting the means to end their lives. The position of the Supreme Court is that the debate concerning the morals and ethics surrounding the right to die is one that should be continued (Stein, 2000). As an increasing number of the population enters late adulthood, the emphasis on giving patients an active voice in determining certain aspects of their own death is likely.

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