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# Now They Want to Kill Children –Euthanasia in Europe

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A report out of Brussels indicates that Belgium will legalize euthanasia for terminally ill children, according to legislation introduced by members of the ruling Flemish Liberal Party. The bill, proposed by senators Jeannine Leduc and Paul Wille, asserts that children and teenagers suffering with terminal illnesses and “intolerable pain” have the right to choose death rather than suffering. As the legislation reads, “Their suffering is as great (and) the situation they face is as intolerable and inhumane (as that of young adults).”

Belgium, like many of its European neighbors, has been sliding toward the practice of euthanasia for decades. The nation’s current legislation allows euthanasia in the case of adults who are assumed to be fully conscious and able to consent to their own death. According to the current law, children as young as twelve are given the “right” to have their lives terminated, and children sixteen and older are able to do so without parental consent.

The practice of euthanizing children is already legal in the Netherlands, where Dutch euthanasia advocates have been constantly pushing for a lower age of consent. Writing in *The Weekly Standard*, Wesley J. Smith reports that the Groningen University Hospital has now decided that its physicians will be able to euthanize children under the age of twelve, “if doctors believe their suffering is intolerable or if they have an incurable illness.” Children too young to gain a driver’s license will now be able to choose their own death by means of legalized euthanasia.

The debate—or more accurately, the lack of debate—in the Netherlands indicates that the culture of death is now galloping toward moral nihilism and the open embrace of death over life.

As Smith points out, the use of the word “incurable” means nothing more than “a euphemism for killing babies and children who are seriously disabled.” In reality, doctors have no objective criteria to use in making decisions for euthanasia. Despite safeguards previously written into Dutch law, that culture has seen a progression from passive euthanasia to active euthanasia and from euthanasia with consent to euthanasia without consent in less than a generation.

A study published in 1997 documents the Dutch slide from “assisted suicide” to the killing of infants. The British medical journal *The Lancet* reported that physicians were actually killing between eighty and ninety infants per year—amounting to eight percent of all infant deaths in the Netherlands. As Wesley Smith reports, “at least 10-15 of these killings involved infants who did not require life-sustaining treatment to stay alive. The study found that a shocking 45 percent of neonatologists and 31 percent of pediatricians who responded to questionnaires have killed infants.”

This staggers the moral imagination. Those statistics—surely now eclipsed by even more dramatic percentages—reveal that Dutch physicians have turned themselves into instruments of death. These doctors now place themselves as the judges of who shall live and who shall die. This same report indicates that many of these decisions are being made without the consent or knowledge of parents. Broken-hearted parents are simply told that their babies have died, when in

reality their own physicians have put them to death. As Smith comments: "For anyone paying attention to the continuing collapse of medical ethics in the Netherlands, this isn't at all shocking. Dutch doctors have been surreptitiously engaging in eugenic euthanasia of disabled babies for years, although it technically is illegal, since infants can't possibly give consent to be killed."

To the north, Great Britain now faces the question of euthanasia as a recent report claims that twenty thousand Britons are being euthanized each year.

Dr. Hazel Biggs, Director of Medical Law at the University of Kent, has produced a shocking report claiming that at least eighteen thousand people a year are being euthanized by their own physicians. Another seven thousand patients are reported to die by "voluntary euthanasia," or a form of "assisted suicide."

Biggs, who supports voluntary euthanasia, was led to her study after considering parallel research conducted in Belgium and Australia. In those two countries, physicians were granted immunity for the purposes of research, and both supporters and opponents of euthanasia were shocked by the high levels of physician-assisted death reported by the physicians themselves.

Current British law calls for a sentence of up to fourteen years for physicians who help patients to die. At present, involuntary euthanasia is explicitly forbidden by British law and the prevailing code of medical ethics. Can anyone expect this to last?

The British House of Lords is already taking up proposed legislation that would allow voluntary euthanasia and provide legal protections for physicians engaged in the practice. The proposal has launched a fierce debate in the pages of the nation's newspapers, the most important of which focuses on a series of letters exchanged between some of the most famous and influential British philosophers.

In a letter published September 20, 2004 in *The Times* [London], Professor A. C. Grayling of Birkbeck College, University of London, is joined by several of his colleagues in arguing for voluntary euthanasia. "Although we believe assisted dying to be a frequent phenomenon, it takes place in secret because it is illegal. Apart from the intrinsic undesirability of underground practices, the illegality of assisted dying places great burdens on medical professionals and family members who respond to requests from sufferers for help to die. Moreover, without proper safeguards the most vulnerable are at increased risk from abuse. Most importantly, the Bill provides an option for competent terminally ill sufferers to choose an assisted comfortable and dignified end to life legally and without fear of compromising their careers and families." Earlier in their letter, the philosophers argued "that people should be guaranteed choice and dignity at the end of their lives to remove the fear, discomfort and loss of dignity and autonomy that can attend the process of dying."

In a powerful and eloquent response, Professor John Haldane of St. Andrews University in Scotland joined with others in responding to Grayling. According to Haldane and his associates, Grayling and other pro-euthanasia advocates "confirm the existence of a slippery slope by sliding down it."

As their letter documents, the Grayling argument speaks of euthanasia because of patients' suffering "unbearably from a terminal illness." Yet, the Grayling group quickly changes the foundation of its argument from unbearable suffering to "loss of dignity and autonomy." As Haldane insists, "In the space of a sentence, they [Grayling and his colleagues] glissade from unbearable suffering to fear, discomfort, etc."

Haldane then asks: "Principles invoked by advocates of euthanasia typically subvert the legal boundaries they propose. If suffering is unbearable, why should people released be confined to the terminally ill? If the crucial question is the 'quality' of existence, why should euthanasia be denied to those unable to request it?"

The Haldane letter, cosigned by Alasdair Macintyre of Notre Dame University, pushes the case against euthanasia at the pragmatic level as well. All those "safeguards" supposedly put in place to protect euthanasia from "abuse" are routinely disregarded. As the reports from the Netherlands make clear, doctors there have been routinely breaking even the liberal euthanasia laws of that nation, putting children and babies to death in clear violation of the law and medical ethics. Furthermore, they are now sufficiently bold to acknowledge this practice to researchers.

What kind of culture produces physicians who will kill their own patients? What degree of moral insanity is necessary

for 31 percent of pediatricians to admit that they have killed infants, along with a staggering 45 percent of neonatologists?

The Culture of Death no longer creeps and crawls. It is now advancing at a breathtaking pace, and the transformation of medical ethics and practice now evident in Belgium and the Netherlands is already taking root in the logic proposed by euthanasia advocates in the United States. Assisted suicide is now legal in the state of Oregon, and a federal court recently told the Bush administration that the federal government has no right to challenge the Oregon law.

Herbert Hendin, a physician who serves as Executive Director of the American Suicide Foundation, documents the slide toward euthanasia in *Seduced by Death: Doctors, Patients, and the Dutch Cure*. As Hendin explains, “Euthanasia advocates have been seduced by death. They have come to see suicide as a cure for disease and a way of appropriating death’s power over the human capacity for control. They have detoured what could be a constructive effort to manage the final phase of life in more varied and individualistic ways onto a dangerous route to nowhere. These are not the attitudes on which to base a nation’s compassionate social policy.”

That is an understatement. The Christian worldview posits an understanding of human life that begins with fertilization and continues all the way to natural death. At every moment and stage of development along that continuum, we must contend for the sanctity and dignity of human life. We must confront the Culture of Death and euthanasia advocates with a solid wall of informed resistance, refusing to accept the premise that we possess autonomy over our own lives, or that we have the right to decide the time or means of our own death.

The debate in Great Britain is illuminating, even as the legislative possibilities in Belgium are frightening. But the report out of the Netherlands pushes the envelope of moral understanding. We can hardly imagine doctors who kill babies and now propose to kill children—all in the name of “compassion.”

Wesley J. Smith reminds that Dutch physicians are now engaged “in the kind of euthanasia activities that got some German doctors hanged after Nuremberg.” Have we learned nothing?

