

Media Portrayal of the Current State of Euthanasia in Australia and A New Potential Policy

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Introduction

Euthanasia, as a health issue, draws constant attention from the media in Australia. The media has developed somewhat of a “fascination” with the topic, frequently commenting on medical, ethical and legal developments both locally and internationally. The media’s preoccupation with all issues concerning the early termination of life, is almost beyond comprehension. Perhaps the media’s attraction to the topic stems from the fact that euthanasia is sensational, emotional and still very controversial. Controversy draws in an audience and naturally sells publications and advertising space. Inevitably, however, the power of the media has a profound impact upon the shape and direction of Australian health policy on euthanasia and other forms of early life ending measures [1].

As global phenomena, euthanasia has become significant mainly due to advances in medical knowledge and technology. Together these advances have meant that death can now be postponed for longer than ever before. Human beings can now live a long time with chronic conditions that may not be deadly. However, quality of life issues necessarily arises as a result of this longer life expectancy. Also, the burden and cost to the health system of people living longer is rising in an era of Governments around the world cutting health spending.

Legal implications

Euthanasia is interesting from a legal perspective. All too often, what appears to be the most favourable ethical outcome and action in a particular instance either conflicts with the law or the legal position is uncertain. This is particularly the case in Australia. The National Health and Medical Research Council discussion paper

states that if a doctor does not perform routine medical treatment, the doctor could be charged with manslaughter or murder depending on the circumstances [2].

Media attention

The media’s attention on euthanasia has by no means been one-sided or always sensational. The media, in Australia, has drawn on various perspectives on the topic, both from commentators and the public, locally and overseas. Even when there is not much discussion on the topic in Australia, the media will bring it back into the spotlight. For example, in February 2014, media attention focused on the euthanasia position in Belgium [3]. Belgium became the first nation to permit euthanasia for terminally ill minors when its Government enacted a new “right-to-die” law by a significant majority. The legal position in Belgium goes beyond that of the Netherlands which requires the child to be both over 12 and judged mature before they can decide to end their lives. The position in the Netherlands is supported in Belgium, where adult euthanasia was legalised in 2002 [4]. In reporting the matter, the media devoted attention to the religious division cause by euthanasia, highlighting opposition by different religious leaders [5]. Interestingly, note was made on how the media in other countries paid more attention to the news in Belgium, than the media in Belgium itself.

Sensational elements to the debate over euthanasia, however, have drawn much attention by the media in Australia. Belgium’s liberal approach to the policy drew most international media attention when the right to die was granted to deaf twin brothers who may become blind and to a transgender individual after a sex-change operation that failed [6,7]. Such reporting can lead to the trivialisation of an otherwise serious topic. The extent of trivialisation of the debate over euthanasia, to the point of ridicule over the decision is evident in the quotations of patients making the decision to end their lives [8,9]. For example, the individual in

Belgium whose life was ended after obtaining a sex change was quoted as saying: 'My new breasts did not match my expectations and my new penis had symptoms of rejection. I do not want to be a monster' [10]. It would seem that statements like these add little to the euthanasia debate, and are likely to incite even greater divisions of opinion of the health issue, rather than furthering informed policies on the subject matter.

To its credit, however, the debate over euthanasia in the Australian media has by no means been single-sided. Interestingly, the media, perhaps to draw in an audience often presents multiple and diverse views on the topic. It is not so much that different perspectives on the debate are not presented, but rather than the media's focus tends to be on those cases which are clearly unusual, controversial or just outright sensational. On occasion, the media has even taken the topic of euthanasia very seriously. It has given it the consideration it deserves. In June 2013, Williams a University of New South Wales law lecturer was quoted on the topic [11]. Williams provided his opinion on the direction of euthanasia in Australia from a legal perspective. He noted that politicians in Australia were not keeping up with community views on the topic of euthanasia.

A new health agenda

Possibly due to the pressure of the media in its campaign to put euthanasia on the Australian health agenda [1], the media itself reported that Victorians would be able to request medical practitioners to not give them life-prolonging treatment for possible future illnesses, under a State government push to permit individuals to die with dignity [12]. Under the Victorian Government's health plan, as a condition of hospital funding, patients will now be encouraged to create "advance care plans" setting out the kind of medical care they would want in the event of illnesses such as dementia, cancer or brain damage.

Conclusion

The debate over euthanasia in Australia cannot be trivialised, either by the media or anyone else really, as it concerns serious issues surrounding life, health and death. It touches on people's most sensitive beliefs, sometimes their religion and ethics. It is for this reason that the topic of euthanasia while regularly in the Australian media, should properly be the subject of careful debate. Rather than influenced by vested interest groups who have the

power and influence to voice their opinions through the media. The more widely debated the topic, the greater the likelihood that the direction of euthanasia, in Australia, will be accepted by the broader society. With a topic that so deeply touches upon so many human notions, however, it is unclear whether there can ever be any consensus among individuals from so many diverse backgrounds with so many differing opinions. In no country is the issue of euthanasia more likely to divide a nation than in a country such as Australia, where pluralism is a reality.

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