

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM ON EUTHANASIA AND ASSISTED SUICIDE

CURRENT ISSUES: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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The symposium was impressive from many perspectives. Notably it was the first such gathering of leading spokespeople in the field with a list of international presenters from the United Kingdom (UK), the Netherlands, Germany, the United States and Canada.

The topics were difficult and the presenters impressed attendees with their expertise, courage, humanity, compassion and, in certain instances, with their humour. They addressed this very difficult topic from the historical perspective as Dr. Peter Saunders, campaign director of the Care Not Killing Alliance, reviewed the history of the law in Britain and the defeat of a recent assisted suicide bill there. Henk Reitsema of

the Netherlands, one of the leaders of the L'Abri Fellowship, addressed the question of "How did the Netherlands get here?" Both euthanasia and assisted suicide have been practiced since the early 1970s in the Netherlands. The history of the Hippocratic tradition "to do no harm" was the focus of Dr. William Toffler's presentation, from 400 B.C. when the tradition emerged to the evolution and legalization of euthanasia in the state of Oregon today. Dr. Toffler is national director of Physicians for Compassionate Care Education Foundation in Portland, Oregon.

Professor Mark Mostert, an expert on the Nazi T4-euthanasia program, reviewed the historical context of the progression from World War I, when wartime changed people's concept of those with disabilities, to 1938 when there were thousands of requests for "mercy killing." At this point the state had set the stage for "explicit killing" – the Holocaust. In the Nazi Blueprint (today) the quality of life argument is used by proponents of euthanasia and it is apparent that people with disabilities are measured in terms of their economic worth.

These presentations were challenging and difficult to hear in terms of how society has lost its way, shifting from a "sanctity of life" to a "quality of life" mentality. This was even more evident in the personal stories beginning with Alison Davis who is the national co-ordinator of No Less Human, a group for disabled people, their families and caregivers in the UK. No Less Human campaigns for the right to life for all disabled people, from conception to natural death. Alison has spina bifida, hydrocephalus and various disabling conditions, and requires a wheelchair. Alison told her personal story including the numerous attempts on her own life. If euthanasia had been legal she would have requested it. If the UK's *Mental Capacity Act 2005* had been law, her doctor's hands would have been tied. If the advanced power of attorney had been in effect her doctor's hands again would have been tied. She revealed that she would have missed the best years of her life.

A very tragic and familiar story to members is the Terri Schiavo story. Bobby Schindler, executive director of the Terri Schindler Schiavo Foundation Center for Health Care

Ethics, Inc. was also at this symposium and related the very personal and agonizing sequence of events that led to the death of his sister on March 31, 2005. Terri died of dehydration, deprived of food and water, 15 years after her collapse at the age of 26.

The withdrawal of hydration and nutrition is happening in neonatal intensive care units reports Barbara Farlow of The World Alliance for Patient Safety. Farlow's daughter Annie had a pre-natal diagnosis of congenital defects. Annie did not have the severe defects expected and was able to come home from hospital but developed respiratory disease resulting in an emergency respiratory crash. Annie lived for 16 hours in the critical care unit. Non-invasive tests ordered for a highly suspected tracheal condition were not done; a Do Not Resuscitate order had been written without the parents' consent and alarms were silenced. A letter was received from the chief of critical care saying that the final 24 hours of care were not appropriate. There has been an appeal for an inquest and Annie's parents are waiting for the coroner to respond.

Delegates were privileged to meet and hear the highly renowned founding director of the McGill Centre for Medicine, Ethics and Law, Dr. Margaret Somerville. Dr. Somerville, whose topic was the "Secular Argument," contended that "to legalize euthanasia is to change the way we understand ourselves, human life and its meaning. What is unique about us as humans, what is of the essence of our humanness and humanity?" In Dr. Somerville's conclusion, she spoke of the challenges to convince the public that euthanasia is wrong. Death is a final human act through which meaning can still be found. That requires us "to reject the values, principles, attitudes and beliefs that 'death on wheels' symbolizes and implements."

Attendees were also privileged to meet and hear the amazing Catherine Frazee, co-director of Ryerson RBC Foundation Institute for Disability Studies Research and Education. Catherine is eloquent, humorous, courageous and fiercely independent in spite of significant disabilities since childhood. Catherine's current work as a writer, educator and researcher focuses upon the rights, identity, experience and well-being of persons with disabilities. Catherine asks the question, "What is it precisely that we stand for? Proponents of euthanasia and assisted suicide think they are for 'Freedom.' We could say in response 'Equality' – we need to have 'freedom with equality!'"

Throughout the symposium there were statements and observations that made a lasting impression and I would like to conclude by citing some of these remarks.

- "What suffering people need is hope, encouragement and assistance in living until they die a natural death" (Alison Davis, No Less Human).
- "Excellent end-of-life care is multi-dimensional, physical, social, and spiritual. Patients who have good hospice care

want to continue to live" (Dr. Bob Orr, Vermont Alliance for Ethical Health Care).

- "Dying with Dignity" – "To die with dignity is to die being loved and cared for – implicit message being that you are worth this effort" (Henk Reitsema, LAbri Fellowship).
- "Right-to-life does not mean there is an equal 'right-to-die'" (Alison Davis, No Less Human).
- "Pain is not necessarily the cause of people seeking assisted suicide; it's the loss of dignity – needing help with such things as using the toilet" (Marilyn Golden, Disabilities Rights Education & Defense Fund, California).
- "There is more loneliness and sense of abandonment today even though we have more resources than ever before" (Alex Schadenberg, Euthanasia Prevention Coalition).

It is very important that these end-of-life issues are discussed with loved ones and families. Councils are encouraged to raise awareness of the issues by inviting guest speakers. The powerful video *Turning the Tide* with discussion guide is a very valuable resource on this topic and is available for \$50.00 by contacting the Euthanasia Prevention Coalition, Box 25033, London, Ontario, N6C 6A8; email:info@epcc.ca or call (877) 439-3348. The complete written report on the symposium may be obtained by contacting national office at national@cwl.ca. †

GOOD SAMARITAN PARISH COUNCIL REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN



Pictured are Marlene Sentes and Antonette Rothecker.

President Antonette Rothecker and Member Marlene Sentes designed a CWL birthday card that is given to students. It is hoped that one day the students will remember the thoughtfulness of the CWL and perhaps join the CWL or the Knights of Columbus.