

Opinion

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Euthanasia

Chinese Controversies On Euthanasia

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Euthanasia has two meanings in Chinese. The literal meaning is 'peaceful and happy dying'. Another meaning, said to have appeared long ago, is 'painless killing'. *An le si*

- the modern translation of euthanasia – probably means 'to cause people to die painlessly', which is roughly identical to the western phrase 'mercy killing'.

Historically, Chinese people would give up treatment for terminally ill patients. When such a patient was beyond cure, doctors and family members, through a process of consultation, would always agree to withdraw all passive treatment, and try to satisfy the patient's will in order to appease the patient and let him or her die a good death. Even now this practice is considered to be a kind of natural death with great harmony.

However, socio-economic development – including medical progress and the shortage of medical resources which followed that progress – has resulted in great changes in the Chinese mind at this historical juncture. In recent years some issues related to euthanasia have been presented and reported resulting in an open discussion about the ethical, social, and legal dimensions of euthanasia.

The first legal case happened in 1986 when a physician medically accelerated the death of a patient with terminal cancer because her dependents required it. This case caused a stir and triggered widespread discussion of euthanasia among professionals and the general public in the mass media.

The long-term discussion which began in the early 1980s has seen both theoretical and clinical aspects of euthanasia dealt with. Although great progress has been achieved, there are still a lot of problems with which we are being confronted. I would like to address the following points and provide some Chinese perspectives on euthanasia.

1. Concept of euthanasia and death

As I mentioned above, the concept of euthanasia is not clear enough in Chinese. Apart from linguistic factors, I think there may be some historical reasons for this. Chinese people did not have the tragic experience with euthanasia which Europeans had in World War II. Consequently Chinese understand and use the word 'euthanasia' in their own way, which in turn may easily lead to abuse and stimulate more debate.

Moreover, the Chinese definition of death remains oriented towards cardio-respiratory function, although many experts have suggested that the brain-oriented concept of death should be adopted. In circumstances where a number of the functions of an individual's body is being artificially maintained in the presence of severe brain damage, it is important for doctors to be clear as to what they mean by death. Chinese doctors often face cases in which they have to decide whether a brain-dead patient should be medically 'killed' under the name of euthanasia. It is really a chaos caused by conceptual confusions in clinical practice.

2. Ethical controversies

There are two opinions about euthanasia worthy of consideration here. Firstly, some people think that euthanasia is sharply against the traditional and modern values of morality and accordingly unacceptable. This is so because longevity has always been regarded as an important goal to be sedulously strived for in one's life, and because the physician is required to adhere to the moral principle of "curing the sick and saving the dying". The second and opposite view puts more emphasis upon the interest of the whole society and community rather than the individual. From this point of view, society and even the patient's family could benefit from the euthanasia of the patient, and it could lead to the just distribution of medical resources. I can hardly agree with these ideas. I think that there ought to be a case by case moral assessment where euthanasia is concerned, the most important principle being autonomy but beneficence.

3. Cultural traditions

Some Chinese colleagues have over estimated the degree to which euthanasia would be acceptable to the Chinese people. They believe that euthanasia is increasingly gaining acceptance among the Chinese people, and that those who are against euthanasia are simply relying on out-dated ideas. This, however, neglects the fact that China has been a Confucian society for thousands of years, and that Confucianism still has great influence on Chinese people.

The Chinese pay a great deal of attention to their traditional culture. Historically, Chinese people have noted the distinctively 'this-worldly' cast, and emphasize the specifically human mode of existence. In this context, it is not surprising that any premature or 'unnatural' death was considered to be an aberration.

Another factor needing to be emphasised here is “filial piety”, which is the central principle in Confucian ethics and which plays a role of great importance in Chinese society, especially in life and death issues. It would be the greatest outrage if dependents dared to stop treatment for their parents and decided to practice euthanasia, even if they had good reason to believe that this would be in keeping with their parent’s will.

4. Legal aspects

China is one of those countries where written law is rigorously used. However, one can find nothing about euthanasia in our present laws. Moreover, according to the criminal law, a person practising euthanasia would be judged guilty of murder. Based on the status quo, there is strong support for the legalisation of euthanasia in the general public – especially among Chinese medical professionals. But there is neither a strong enough moral basis nor the necessary conditions for such legislation now. For one thing, we have not reached consistency in our understanding of the issues related to euthanasia; and for another, there are still obstacles in current Chinese law, such as the provisions related to murder, stipulations of patients’ rights, living will and definition of death, etc.. There is a long way to go before such legislation could be achieved.

Euthanasia, as well as other bioethical problems, is quite a new ethical dilemma in China. We are only at the beginning stage in dealing with these dilemmas, there being a need for further studies and exchanges among people in different fields.