

Euthanasia Reality Check

There have been numerous attempts to legalise euthanasia in SA. Naturally, some have pointed to The Netherlands where assisted suicide and euthanasia have been practised openly for decades. So it's timely to take a Dutch euthanasia reality check.

Netty was in her fifties, physically healthy, but suffering emotionally. One son had suicided, the other died from cancer, and then divorce ended her marriage. Two months after the death of her son she sought assisted suicide and soon received it with the help of her doctor, a psychiatrist who failed to acknowledge her depression and agreed with her that her life was not worth living. Hers is one of the few Dutch assisted suicide cases to come into the public gaze, but it highlights something deeply problematic about Holland's experiment with medical killing. Just as euthanasia advocate Phillip Nitschke has promoted a suicide pill for "troubled teens" legalised euthanasia in Holland has become a dreadful answer to the sadness, loneliness and depression that marks so many lives at one time or another.

When Mum lies silent at the end of her days and euthanasia is an option, will she hear, "Well, you decide Mum", and therein be confirmed in her belief that no one really cares? In the Northern Territory's brief experiment with euthanasia, seven people made formal use of the legislation. Details of the cases were published in the medical journal *The Lancet*. It makes for sad reading that our community effectively agreed with people distressed about their condition that death was their solution, when instead genuine care could have made all the difference.

This solution is something The Netherlands has taken considerable time getting used to. Which is hardly surprising since people are instinctually averse to ending the lives of their fellow human beings under any circumstances. At least at first.

In Holland, what began as assisted suicide soon became euthanasia. First it was the terminally ill, now the chronically ill. Initially for physical illness, now for psychological distress. At first, strictly upon voluntary request, now without it. The Rummelink Reports into euthanasia in The Netherlands cite thousands of cases where euthanasia has occurred without a request from the patient. Some euthanasia doctors 'just know best'. And for those who think euthanasia in Holland is all about rational adults, it's time to think again. The Dutch now permit euthanasia for 12-16 year olds, and in what has become known as the Groningen Protocol, dozens of disabled babies have been illegally euthanased by doctors who are now pressuring the government for legal permission to terminate infant lives.

Despite all the rhetoric about strict criteria, mandatory reporting and tight regulation, it is impossible to safely manage legalised euthanasia. As Herbert Hendin, head of the American Suicide Foundation and Professor of Psychiatry at New York Medical College, puts it "One hardly knows which is more chilling, the widespread flouting of the scant and effectively toothless legal regulation of euthanasia in Holland, or the sangfroid with which it is defended by the Dutch practitioners." Sangfroid is from the French, meaning literally, cold-blooded.

Institutionalising assisted suicide and euthanasia will also rob people of the critical and valuable moments in their last days to 'make their peace' and honestly 'close the books'. Premature departures with a lethal injection make short shrift of that, and can leave others grieving over lost opportunities and things left unsaid.

What's more, turning doctor into executioner drastically undermines the culturally powerful figure of physician as trusted guardian of life into something far more sinister.

In the end, it is a naïve assumption that where Holland has failed, we can make it work. For legalising euthanasia is by nature fatally flawed.