

Living In The Crosshairs: Battling Euthanasia's Threat To Disability

Rights

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I live every day under the looming shadow of euthanasia, always aware that I am a target for a so-called "mercy killing." Just one sickness, medical emergency or accident separates me from those who would kill me and call it "death with dignity."

While a hospital is a place of healing and care, it is also a potential place of danger for those of us who are disabled, elderly or chronically ill. Whenever I have been admitted to a hospital, I experience a certain apprehension, knowing medical caregivers may "opt out" of providing me wanted life-saving medical treatment if they decide my quality of life is not sufficient to justify their effort and expense.

You see, I am a disabled Marine combat veteran – critically wounded in Vietnam and residing in a wheelchair for the past 54 years. During my two-year, three-month long hospitalization – which included 27 surgeries – doctors employed many heroic efforts, hooked me to numerous machines and saved my life. That was from late 1969 to early 1972. Today, that extraordinary level of effort is considered intrusive and burdensome – characterized as just "prolonging suffering."

Everyone of us is one accident or illness away from finding ourselves in the crosshairs of the growing threat of euthanasia. Today, many senior citizens are pressured to sign "do not resuscitate" orders upon admission to the hospital. They are devalued because of their age. As our Medicare and Medicaid systems lurch from one fiscal crisis to the next, the pressure increases to save money by denying medical care to those patients whose treatment needs are the most expensive. That includes me – along with many others who live with either physical or mental disabilities, or chronic illnesses, whatever their ages.

The constant pro-euthanasia drumbeat of our modern "culture of death" is astounding. Medically killing the disabled is described as mercy. Starving and thirsting the elderly to death is called compassion. Denying wanted, life sustaining medical treatment to the chronically ill is applauded as being a good steward of scarce healthcare dollars.

This push to deny medical treatment to devalued members of our human family is shrouded in the politics of language. Choice and freedom are positive words in our

democracy and it is no accident these words are used by those who promote death as some form of social good. Choosing to die is applauded as the “new freedom” – but it is seldom mentioned that this so-called freedom is, in reality, limited to those who are sick or have physical or mental disabilities.

Medically killing people with disabilities is often justified with the phrase “death with dignity.” I cannot overemphasize how offensive the phrase, “death with dignity” is to me. What that really says is that my life as a disabled person lacks dignity – and that I would be better off dead.

I realize many people fear old age, illness and disability. As a fifteen-year-old, I saw a severely disabled man and distinctly remember thinking; “I would rather be dead than live like that.” I was sincere, but wrong. After fifty-plus years in a wheelchair, I understand that personal happiness, value and self-worth have no relation to someone’s degree of physical perfection.

Sadly, this “physical perfection truth” is now common in our society. Definitions are upgraded to reflect this. “Terminal” used to mean that a patient would die even with lifesaving treatment. Now, it means one will die *without* the application of life-sustaining-treatment. This is a game changer for people with disabilities as well as those with age-related medical needs.

The Veterans Administration labels disability as terminal if it is nonreversible: “Terminal illness, as defined herein, includes but is not limited to, conditions where death is imminent, as well as chronic and debilitating conditions from which there is no reasonable hope for recovery.”

I have a chronic and debilitating condition from which there is no reasonable hope for recovery – as do many thousands of our disabled veterans.

This nation has become a perilous place for all devalued people who find themselves living in a culture that now sees therapeutic killing as a viable medical treatment.

The right to die is quickly becoming the duty to die. The pool of death always expands, and when a price is put on life, *the price goes down*. We have gone down this road before and the outcome was catastrophic. The intrinsic value of life must once again be embraced before it is too late.

Our future depends on it.