



Euthanasia hurts families

DEREK MIEDEMA

Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada



My brother, who is severely handicapped, was once admitted to the hospital for pneumonia. During the few hours my family was not with him, a “do not resuscitate” bracelet was attached to his arm. My mother found out about it by accident when she asked what the purple bracelet was for.

I can imagine the assumption: he’s so severely handicapped that we should let the pneumonia kill him. To have my brother die this way would

have been absolutely devastating to our family.

Bill 52, which ushers in doctor-assisted suicide in Quebec, has been discussed a lot by now. However, no one has addressed how arguments over life and death for loved ones can have lasting effects on family relationships and radically alter family dynamics.

Individual choice, communal impact

My brother survived. Not such a happy ending for Tom Mortier, whose mother was killed by euthanasia in 2012. She was clinically depressed and had cut off contact with her son, contrary to his wishes. Tom found out his mother was dead only when he was called to make arrangements for her body at the morgue.

My brother lives in Canada, where euthanasia is currently illegal. Tom Mortier lives in Belgium, where euthanasia is legal. That Quebec’s Bill 52 is modeled on Belgium’s law is fact, not fearmongering. If Quebec’s newly passed euthanasia bill goes unchallenged, euthanasia will soon be tapping on your door regardless of your province. Families may soon face the reality of disagreements not over whether mom or dad should be allowed to die, but whether or not they should be killed.

Euthanasia, you see, is not just an issue of individual choice. Family will be faced with this discussion ahead of time. Or, like Tom Mortier, they must deal with the aftermath of a loved one’s choice to be killed by their doctor.

Some might argue these disagreements already exist. Indeed, you may already know families who have debated taking a parent off their respirator. Reconciliation can be difficult

when foundational beliefs about right and wrong at the end of life clash. However, death by euthanasia ups the ante considerably and in concrete ways.

Current disagreements focus on whether or not today is the day to end efforts to heal and allow for natural death. This is already a very charged issue. Legal euthanasia means debating whether or not mom or dad should be killed.

Imagine if your father chooses euthanasia. You agree, but your sister doesn't. How do you bridge that gap? When the law changes centuries of shared practice by allowing doctors to kill patients, it leaves those who defend life with no legal recourse. Support in favour of life becomes merely "deeply held, but personal belief," rather than a shared societal value.

Protecting life was once a bright line in the medical profession. That it is no longer will cause confusion that only compounds grief at a difficult time. Familial relationships of those left living may never recover.

That's another new
kind of family dispute
— when doctors
override a family's
wishes because they
have been granted too
much power

In the past centuries, the state did not help people commit suicide but rather discouraged it, in keeping with the Hippocratic Oath to "do no harm." This is being overturned in Quebec and we cannot expect that the effects will be limited to only the individuals involved.

Indeed, where euthanasia is legalized it spreads to include more and more people. The Belgian Society of Intensive Care Medicine is now arguing that euthanasia become standard practice in the ICU. The society states "it must be clear that the final decision is made by the care team and not by the relatives." Since ICU patients are often unconscious, this means doctors are proposing that they have the authority to kill, over a patients' family that disagrees.

That's another new kind of family dispute — when doctors override a family's wishes because they have been granted too much power.

No one wants to watch their loved one suffer. Eradicating pain and suffering is a profoundly different discussion from whether or not a family member should be killed. On the former we can all agree. On the latter, profound divisions among siblings will rear their ugly heads.

How you die will always affect your family. Asking your doctor to kill you will likely leave your family divided and distressed. That's not the kind of legacy we should be leaving our children.

Published in the [National Post](#) June 16, 2014.

[Derek Miedema is a Researcher at the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada and author of No Second Chances: International experience shows legal euthanasia is never just for "exceptional" cases.](#)

Permission granted to reprint in full with attribution to the Institute of Marriage and Family Canada