

# Assisted suicide can have 'dreadful consequences'

Who can blame those afflicted persons whose thoughts turn to suicide? A prolonged process of dying is more frightening than the prospect of death itself. For most of human history, people most often died in infancy or childhood. Those who lived to a ripe old age might have achieved forty years of life. Without advanced medical technology or sophisticated drug therapies, most people died relatively quickly. Now it's typical to live long enough to die of some illness that was not easily cured. Advances in medicine hold off death longer than we might like. And since it's possible to keep people alive, physicians often feel compelled to do so — either simply because they can — or because they fear some legal or moral liability. Add to that the fanaticism of those who value "life" so highly that they fight court battles to prevent family members from "pulling the plug" on the brain dead, and we are not much encouraged when we survey our own prospective endings. (Just such a case has been in process in Virginia, where the wife of a man in chronic vegetative states who had told his family he did not want to be kept alive in such circumstances, faces court challenges from people whose interest in the case is purely abstract.)

I am not very courageous myself. That being the case, the possibility of being able legally to resort to so-called "physician-assisted suicide" has its appeal. If hard pressed, there would be a somewhat easier remedy than seeing an illness through. Certainly God doesn't give us "extra credit" for proving that we can tough it out. It's not hard to see how people might come to support legalizing suicide with the aid of a physician — either as a hedge against one's own possibly rough ending, or out of compassion for others. Those who have

## FOCUS ON THEOLOGY



REV. RONALD P. BYARS

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cared for or witnessed the prolonged suffering of a loved one have the most convincing credentials in this debate.

Nevertheless, I expect that I will vote against the referendum to permit the legalization of physician-assisted suicide. I will cast my vote keenly aware that I might be wrong. And yet, my conscience cannot permit me to support this referendum. Why? In part for reasons that I would have to describe as sub-rational.

Not irrational mind you — not in conflict with the reasoning mind — but out of some intuitive sense that there is great danger here. It's beyond my power to articulate those sub-rational reasons, but they have a hold on me.

However, when I engage my reasoning powers, I discover that I am simply not persuaded that there is any way of writing a law which can possibly avoid some dreadful consequences. One

such dreadful consequence is that sick people will, in some circumstances, feel a moral pressure, however subtle, to make their families' lot easier by seeking an end to their own lives. Once physician-assisted suicide becomes familiar and unthreatening, people in advanced age may feel that they also ought to check out of the world to avoid consuming resources which might go to impatient descendants. The ethos of medical care will change, and the costs of caring for people who consume medical resources will seem excessive when we have all become accustomed to the option of an easy exit. I don't know whether in Eskimo communities the aged are actually put afloat on an ice floe, but I can see the equivalent becoming acceptable in a culture that links medical technology

with a quick solution to the problem of folks who live too long.

Many physicians and providers of hospice care assure us that there are better ways of dealing with the crises that accompany the end of life. I surely hope so, because I can see in physician-assisted suicide laws an increasing callousness that will turn to impatience with those who hang on longer than society, or their HMO, or their heirs find compatible with their interests. Do I have a better solution? No. But better to live without a "solution", if there is one, than to rush to one that is guaranteed to create more problems than it solves.

The Rev. Ronald P. Byars is pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Birmingham.

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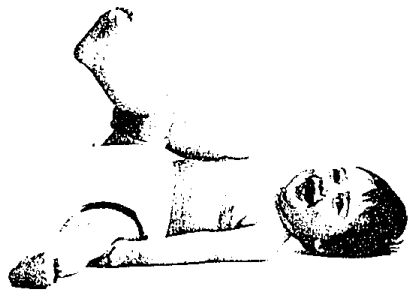
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