

The right to die

Discussion

Work in pairs. Match these words to the definitions below:

suicide

murder

manslaughter

euthanasia

1. The painless killing of a patient who is suffering from an incurable and painful disease.
2. The action of killing oneself deliberately.
3. The illegal, deliberate killing of a human being.
4. The crime of killing a person illegally but not intentionally.

Which of these are crimes in your country?

Do you agree with the law as it is at the moment?

Reading

In pairs or small groups, read the following situations and discuss the questions below each one:

1. Alan Jones, aged 78, had a second stroke three weeks ago. He has severe brain damage and his condition is getting worse. At the request of his daughter, a nurse stops giving him oxygen until his heart stops. The nurse then starts giving oxygen again. People think that Mr Jones died naturally. Later, Mr Jones' daughter tells a friend what happened. The friend is married to a police officer. As a result, the police charge the nurse with murder.
Do you feel that the nurse has committed a crime?
Do you feel that the daughter has committed a crime?
What punishments, if any, should be given?
2. Eighty-seven-year-old Alice Weller broke her hip a year ago. She was taken to hospital where, during an operation to repair her hip, her heart stopped. Although resuscitated, she had severe brain damage and the doctors felt that she had lost consciousness totally and permanently. They therefore wished to switch off her life-support machine. Mrs Weller's family, however, objected strongly, saying that she was extremely religious and felt that only God had the right to take life away.
What do you think the doctors should do?
Do you think Mrs Weller's family have the right to keep her alive?
3. Antonia James, aged 24, suffered severe, irreversible brain damage in a road accident six weeks ago and has not regained consciousness. She is breathing on her own but being fed through a tube. Her parents feel that Antonia's existence is no more than a living nightmare. They want the doctor to stop feeding her so that she will die and they can bury her. The doctor refuses, saying that food and fluids are not 'medical treatment' but the basic necessities of life.
Who do you feel is right – the doctor or the parents?
Who should make this decision – Antonia's parents? The doctors? A court of law?
4. Mike O'Brien, aged 58, has terminal cancer. He is no longer able to live a normal life and is often in great pain. He has always said that when this happened, he would take his own life. However, he is now so weak that he cannot open the bottles of pills he wants to take. His son opens the bottle for him. Mike takes the pills and dies peacefully. The doctor is surprised at Mike's sudden death, realises what has happened and informs the police. The police arrest the son for helping his father to commit suicide.
Is the doctor right to inform the police?
Is the son guilty of committing a crime?

Discussion

With a partner consider each patient in the situations above. What would you want to happen to you? Would you want to die if you had a similar condition?

Now consider the family members in each situation. Would you have done the same thing?