

Navigating Impasses in Bioethics: End of Life, Disability, and Mental Illness

The Von Hügel Institute for Critical Catholic Inquiry, based at St Edmund's College, University of Cambridge, is planning an interdisciplinary workshop on the topic of 'End of Life, Disability, and Mental Illness' to discuss issues arising from current legislation on medically assisted suicide for people with developmental and intellectual disabilities, with a specific focus on mental health.

The contentious issues surrounding the debate on consent and physician-assisted suicide reach difficult impasses when applied to people suffering with mental illness and disabilities. Should euthanasia be granted on the grounds of mental health suffering? What are the challenges and risks of this practice for policy making? How are the views of disability rights movements affecting assisted suicide laws? How is the general perception of disabled lives (in terms of value, dignity, agency) affecting this debate and what consequences does it have for our society?

Euthanasia, under the euphemistic name of Medical Assisted Dying has recently been legalized in Canada. The Canadian government has relied heavily on the experiences of Belgium and the Netherlands, and certain US federal states, which have already legalized euthanasia. In 2015, in an historic vote, UK's MPs rejected the Assisting Dying Bill. Currently a Bill which would enable competent adults who are terminally ill to be provided at their request with specified assistance to end their own lives is being debated by the House of Lords. At the same time, recent reports show an increase in the number of people who experience mental illnesses during their lifetime, often with long-term effect or in the presence of a concomitant disability, resulting in a shorter life expectancy and an increased number of suicides. Case reports from Belgium and the Netherlands show that the Euthanasia Committee is occasionally approving requests related to 'unbearable suffering' connected to mental illness, dementia, or autism spectrum condition. These examples raise challenging questions on the impact of such decisions for vulnerable persons and on the definition of decision-making capabilities in the presence of disabilities and mental illnesses.

There is a knowledge gap when it comes to the question of euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide in the context of mental health. Although a large quantity of literature has been produced on both euthanasia and mental illness, the particular ethical problems and challenges that arise in the context of policies regulating euthanasia for mentally ill patients have not yet been adequately addressed. This workshop aims to provide a unique setting to bring together divergent, often conflicting, perspectives (legal, medical, ethical, anthropological, philosophical, and theological) to re-think some of the key concepts involved in this discussion, such as quality of life, dignified death, autonomy/dependency, mental capacity, unbearable suffering, cultural and social attitudes toward disability. Papers will highlight issues, challenge specific aspects, and / or offer insights for further research work.

In order to facilitate discussion, contributors will present their papers at a one-day event, which will take place in Cambridge on Friday 8th December 2017. Semi-final papers will be circulated among participants prior to the event, and collected for publication in a peer-reviewed journal after it. There will also be wider public engagement and dissemination of the workshop results through the involvement of the Terrence J. Murphy Institute for Catholic Thought, Law, and Public Policy (University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, USA) and the UNESCO Chair in Bioethics and Human Rights (Rome, Italy).

The work of the Von Hügel Institute for Critical Catholic Inquiry brings together the academic resources of the catholic Christian traditions of philosophy, theology and ethics and links them with a broad range of academic disciplines, to produce intellectually principled yet expansive interdisciplinary research, addressing ethical questions of everyday life. We believe that crossing interdisciplinary borders, and especially bringing humanities and sciences into dialogue and collaboration for the common good, can produce a valuable contribution to the academic and public policy debate along with raising public awareness and understanding.

For further questions please contact:

Dr Thana Campos: thana_campos@yahoo.com.br

Dr Lidia Ripamonti: lr387@cam.ac.uk

Von Hügel Institute for Critical Catholic Inquiry, St Edmund's College, Cambridge CB3 0BN, UK
www.vhi.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk

