

The Dutch story: Legalizing euthanasia

From the Editors in the [May 2, 2001](#) issue

In the course of arguing against legalizing euthanasia, ethicist William F. May admitted that he could imagine circumstances in which he would kill for mercy's sake—"when the patient is irreversibly beyond human care, terminal, and in extreme and unabatable pain." Having made this admission, shouldn't he then logically endorse the legalization of such a practice under certain circumstances? No, said May, for "we should not always expect the law to provide us with full protection and coverage for what, in extreme cases, we may need morally to do. Sometimes the moral life calls us into a no-man's land."

May's point is that while the moral life sometimes involves extreme actions, the greater danger is to turn the moral exception into the rule. Yet that is precisely what the Netherlands has done in becoming the first country to legalize euthanasia. For years Dutch custom has informally freed doctors from fear of persecution in this area of their practice (about 4,000 physician-assisted deaths have taken place each year). Now Dutch law codifies the procedures for mercy killing.

What will happen as the no-man's land becomes a society's habitual abode? We suspect at least the following: The availability of euthanasia will diminish efforts to develop and provide better palliative care. When suffering can be eliminated by eliminating the sufferer, the Dutch are likely to question why they should expend precious health care funds, and limited tax monies, to care for those who are chronically or terminally ill. Meanwhile, the chronically ill and the dying will be under increased pressure (even if largely unstated) to request euthanasia. With euthanasia socially endorsed as a rational and cost-effective option, those who suffer will inevitably feel compelled to justify to themselves and their families why they don't take advantage of it.

In this way, the legalization of euthanasia will do more than offer legal protection to the occasional doctor who is willing to enter no-man's land. It will serve to shape a

society's attitude toward all those who suffer. It will undermine the conviction that suffering people need to be cared for to the end of life, and that their lives are every bit as valuable as any other life.

As law professor Mary Ann Glendon has observed, a society's laws not only outline who can be prosecuted and what actions should be prohibited; they also describe the world for us. The law tells members of a particular society a story about who they are, where they are headed, and what they value. The Dutch have chosen a dismal story.