

Case 1: Euthanasia for Alcoholism

On July 14, 2016, a Dutch general practitioner euthanized Mark Langedijk by giving him a lethal injection. Langedijk's death had been approved by a physician from Support and Consultation on Euthanasia (SCEN), the Netherlands' medical body that examines requests from persons wishing to avail themselves of state-assisted dying. "Enough is enough," stated the 41-year-old alcoholic, who had unsuccessfully undergone twenty-one attempts at rehabilitation for his addiction. His marriage destroyed, Langedijk said he "could not continue to live as an alcoholic."¹

Physician-performed-euthanasia ("mercy killing") has been permissible in the Netherlands since 2002; although still officially illegal, it is not prosecuted when 1) the patient's request is voluntary and well-considered, 2) the patient's suffering is unbearable, and 3) there is no prospect of improvement. A SCEN physician must agree that these criteria are met. Contrary to popular belief and usual practice, the act does not state that euthanasia may only be performed in the 'terminal stage' of a condition.² Initially, 90+% of requests came from terminally ill cancer patients. However, over the last decade requests have come from persons with a greater variety of diagnoses. More than one person has requested and been granted euthanasia for "social isolation and loneliness,"³ and pediatricians have recommended that euthanasia be available to patients as young as 10-years-old. The number of euthanasia deaths has nearly tripled since 2002.⁴

As with any controversial action, worries arise. First, procedural questions arise about the clarity and quantifiability of the criteria generally, and about the distinction (if any) between physical and psychological pain particularly. Second, debates are ongoing about who is the appropriate judge of "enough"; proponents of broader criteria

¹ Bradford Richardson, "Mark Langedijk, Dutch Man, Euthanized over Alcoholism," *The Washington Times*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2016/nov/30/mark-langedijk-dutch-man-euthanized-over-alcoholis/>.

² Regional Euthanasia Review Committee, "Code of Practice," *RTE*, June 13, 2017, <https://www.euthanasiecommissie.nl/uitspraken/brochures/brochures/code-of-practice/1/code-of-practice>.

³ Richardson.

⁴ Gordon Darrocht, "Rise in Euthanasia Requests Sparks Concern as Criteria for Help Widen," *Dutch News*, June 13, 2017, <http://www.dutchnews.nl/features/2015/07/rise-in-euthanasia-requests-sparks-concern-as-criteria-for-help-widen/>.

appeal to patient autonomy, while opponents worry about potential abuse. Finally, the moral obligations of physicians to patients with refractory suffering is unclear.