

# 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?

## Life and death

Look at these phrases from the texts:

He is no longer able to live *a normal life*.

The doctor is surprised at Mike's *sudden death*.

Add *life* or *death* to the following words. Five can use both.

- |                |       |                   |       |
|----------------|-------|-------------------|-------|
| 1. a busy      | ..... | 10. a varied      | ..... |
| 2. an exciting | ..... | 11. a sudden      | ..... |
| 3. a horrible  | ..... | 12. a tragic      | ..... |
| 4. instant     | ..... | 13. a long        | ..... |
| 5. a natural   | ..... | 14. a hard        | ..... |
| 6. a peaceful  | ..... | 15. an unexpected | ..... |
| 7. a premature | ..... | 16. a rewarding   | ..... |
| 8. a full      | ..... | 17. a slow        | ..... |
| 9. a lonely    | ..... | 18. a violent     | ..... |

Look again at the 5 expressions which take both *life* and *death*. Discuss the difference in meaning between them. For example, a *horrible life* and a *horrible death*.

## Discussion

Discuss the following questions in pairs or small groups:

1. A man has been in prison for murder for 30 years and will remain there for the rest of his life. He refuses to eat and says that he wants to die. Should he be allowed to die?
2. The wife of a close friend has died recently. Your friend has been terribly upset since her death. In a conversation with him you begin to suspect that he is thinking of taking his own life. What would you do?
3. A close friend is in hospital suffering from an incurable disease and in a lot of pain. He asks you to bring him in some pills from his home so that he can end his life with dignity. What would you do?
4. A woman terrorist was found guilty of planting a bomb which killed 20 people. She has been sent to prison for 20 years. She now refuses to eat and says that she is not guilty. Should she be allowed to die or should she be kept alive?
5. You are staying in a hotel with a rooftop swimming pool. You go up to the pool one morning and find a woman standing on top of the wall around the outside of the building, about to jump off. What would you do?
6. You are 85. You are starting to suffer from senile dementia. You watched your father die a horrible death from the same thing. Are you going to suffer in the same way or ... ?

## Discussion

Work in pairs or small groups. Read the text and discuss the questions below:

In British law, a person has the right to refuse treatment, provided he or she is fully competent to make that decision. If a patient is not able to ask for or refuse treatment (because, for example, they are unconscious) then a doctor can decide not to give treatment. If a doctor decides to do this, it is good medical practice to consult the patient's relatives.

1. Do you feel these laws are reasonable?
2. Are they the same in your country?

### Four types of euthanasia

**Suicide:** killing yourself. In the UK it is illegal to help someone commit suicide.

**Voluntary euthanasia:** when someone asks to die. They may not be able to commit suicide so they need help or they may not be able to ask to die, but they have left instructions.

**Involuntary euthanasia:** This is when someone has not actually asked to die. However, they are killed so that they do not have to suffer any more.

**Non-voluntary euthanasia:** killing someone who is not able to ask to live or die. For example, they might be in a long-term coma.