

# Thoughts of Euthanasia

Commentary by Dr Al Morris

## Editors Note—

Alfred D. Morris, MD is a retired internist and cardiologist. Al and I worked at the Honolulu Medical Group for many years, but he could not really retire. Al now manages the Hansen's Disease program at Kalaupapa and Hale Mohalu.

In his spare time, he and John Breinich served as coeditors for the November 1995 Special Issue on the History of Medicine in Hawaii, and he continues to help our Journal staff proofreading manuscripts and offering needed advice.

Thanks for your commentary, Al.

Look for the Special Issue on Death with Dignity next month.

Societies and their religions have almost always forbade "murder". However, the definitions of murder usually are less strict the more distance one moves from the gene pool or the more heinous the offense. This obvious protection of the gene pool has survival value for the society or clan. The stratagem of calling the members of the clan "the real people" and the non-members "the other," implying that they are less than human or are devils or defective or are traitors, to escape the proscription of murder is also near universal. This ambiguity has led to very serious problems of ethics and morality, particularly in our enlightened, modern civilization.

In the 1975 movie, the Great Waldo Pepper starring Robert Redford, there is a scene in which Waldo's good friend is trapped in his crashed

and overturned airplane. The spectators run out to the scene smoking cigarettes causing a fire. Waldo's friend in panic calls out to Waldo not to let him burn. Knowing the situation is hopeless Waldo picks up a piece of 2 x 4 and smashes his friend's head probably killing him but possibly only producing unconsciousness. Few of us would see this as anything except an act of compassion rather than murder.

Although not completely agreed upon, our society has now generally accepted that withholding extreme medical measures to support the "brain dead" or immediately terminal patient is not murder and is also compassionate, allowing "death with dignity."

Considerably more disagreement meets the acts of a Dr Kevorkian who would assist the passing of a non terminal but severely disabled, suffering person who wishes to commit suicide.

Along this continuum the problem with abortion, so prominent in political discussion, meets with a much greater dissention unless there are some very clear mitigating circumstances. Even then the division in our society is fierce, even "murderous."

Going a bit further we face the dilemma of rationing scarce resources. Water, fuel, air quality, space to live, all pose constraints which some see as requiring population control. At the same time we want to stop killing each other and eliminate diseases which are killing us. Rationing is already upon us and is impossible to avoid. It is an easy step in logic to determine that resources should not be wasted on those of lesser value to society, the aged, the sick, the disabled, etc. Today, very few of us would condone elimination of these individuals. Tomorrow, who knows?

The next step along the incline (the so-called slippery slope) is rationing of children, involuntary birth control, genetic policing and then genetic engineering; all outside our current approval but not entirely clear as to what may or may not be murder.

Finally, at the end of the spectrum, killing for personal reasons, be it robbery, love, elimination of a witness or a competitor, sheer fun or some such thing is surely what the sixth commandment is all about.

What does all this mean? Murder is not a good thing which we are comfortable with. If there are to be exceptions to a blanket "no kill rule" there must be safeguards which are very carefully put in place. Some good people do not believe we are able to control the situation. Other good people believe that we can control ourselves. And some even believe that the lines should not be clearly drawn so that anyone crossing them is not exactly sure if he will be able to do it without danger to his own well being. And therefore such individuals would be extremely cautious and need to have very strong convictions before they would take their chances with euthanasia.



**mel r. hertz**

MBA, CFP  
Certified Financial Planner

Pacific Tower, Suite 2944  
Phone: 522-0100

Retirement Plans  
•  
Investment Management  
Consulting  
•  
Life and Disability  
Insurance  
•  
Charitable Remainder  
Trusts

**derand**

capital management group

Securities Offered Through IFG Network Securities, Inc.,  
(IFG), Member NASD and SIPC. Financial Planning Services  
Through Associated Financial Planners, Inc. (AFP).



Registered Investment Advisor. mel r. hertz is a registered  
principal of IFG and an associated person of its affiliate AFP,  
both of which are otherwise unaffiliated with derand.