

## The World Medical Association and Voluntary Euthanasia

Most medical associations condemn voluntary euthanasia, falling back on the 1987 World Medical Association statement which reads as follows:

*Euthanasia, that is the act of deliberately ending the life of a patient, even at the patient's own request or at the request of close relatives, is unethical. This does not prevent the physician from respecting the desire of a patient to allow the natural process of death to follow its course in the terminal phase of sickness.*

Cold comfort, indeed, if you are facing a miserable dying process by natural means and even worse if your condition is not terminal but your suffering is to you intolerable with no prospect of relief except in death. However, the World Medical Association in this regard shows extraordinary lack of consistency in its statement on abortion of 1970 as amended in 1983. The statement is set out below. Each clause is followed by an amendment which would be consistent in the case of voluntary euthanasia.

Although different in other respects, abortion and voluntary euthanasia are both moral issues concerning the sanctity of life in which there are opposing views among the medical profession and among the general public. Abortion is to do with the relative rights of the mother and the potential new person. Voluntary euthanasia is to do with the rights of an adult to receive medical assistance from a cooperating doctor when both patient and doctor agree that a quick and peaceful death would be in the best interests of the patient.

### STATEMENT ON THERAPEUTIC ABORTION - OCTOBER 1983

1. The first moral principle imposed on the physician is respect for human life from its beginning. [... until its end.]
2. Circumstances which bring the vital interests of a mother into conflict with the vital interests of her unborn child create a dilemma and raise the question of whether or not the pregnancy should be deliberately terminated.

[Circumstances which bring the preservation of the life of a patient into conflict with the relief of suffering create a dilemma and raise the question whether or not the life should be deliberately terminated if the patient so wishes.]

3. Diversity of response to this situation results from the diversity of attitudes towards the life of the unborn child. This is a matter of individual conviction and conscience which must be respected. [... an individual ...]
4. It is not the role of the medical profession to determine the attitudes and rules of any particular state or community in this matter, but it is our duty both to ensure the protection of our patients and to safeguard the rights of the physician within society. [no change]
5. Therefore, where the law allows therapeutic abortion to be performed, the procedure should be performed by a physician competent to do so in a manner approved by the appropriate authority. [... voluntary euthanasia ...]
6. If the physician considers that his convictions do not allow him to perform an abortion, he may withdraw while ensuring the continuity of medical care by a qualified colleague.

[If the physician considers that his convictions do not allow him to perform voluntary euthanasia, he may withdraw while offering the patient alternative medical care by a qualified colleague if the patient so wishes.]

7. This statement, while it is endorsed by the General Assembly of the World Medical Association, is not to be regarded as binding on any individual member association unless it is adopted by that member association. [no change]

If the World Medical Association can take a neutral stance on abortion and thus acknowledge it to be a matter of conscience for the doctor, why can it not take the same view with voluntary euthanasia?

