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1. Outrage at mercy killing proposal - West Australian
2. Call to let extremely premature babies die: Guidelines 'dangerous' - Canberra Times
3. A plea and a memory of wonderful times - SMH
4. More Belgians choosing euthanasia - AFP
5. Woman poised to take charge - Herald Sun

1. Outrage at mercy killing proposal

West Australian
6th November 2006

British doctors could be allowed to perform mercy killings on severely disabled newborn babies under a controversial proposal put forward by one of Britain's royal medical colleges.

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists claims the "active euthanasia" of seriously disabled infants should be considered for the overall good of families, sparing parents the emotional and financial burden of bringing up the sickest of children.

The move comes as new guidelines introduced in NSW and the ACT recommend that babies born before 26 weeks gestation should not be resuscitated unless the parents request it.

The standards, published in the latest Medical Journal of Australia, formally define the so-called "grey zone" of between 23 weeks and 25 weeks and six days — a time which accounts for about one in 100 premature babies — and state it is acceptable medical practice to allow the baby to die if the parents wish.

The UK euthanasia proposal formed part of a submission to an inquiry into the ethical issues surrounding the policy of prolonging life in newborn babies, claiming a "severely disabled child could mean a disabled family".

"If life-shortening and deliberate interventions to kill infants were available they might have an impact on obstetric decision-making, even preventing some late abortions, as some parents would be more confident about continuing a pregnancy and taking a risk on outcome," the submission said.

The college said mercy killings should be considered alongside non-resuscitation and withdrawal of treatment when considering the options for severely disabled babies.

The proposal has been met with support by some British doctors, geneticists and medical ethicists.

But the idea has been met with outright rejection by Australian doctors.

"It's one thing to deny treatment, but it's another thing to actively end their life," Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists WA chairman Dale Evans said.

"It's not something that's likely to happen here."

Australian Medical Association ethics spokeswoman Rosanna Capolingua described the mercy killing proposal as horrific, adding that there were no plans to introduce the NSW and ACT guidelines on "grey zone" premature babies into WA.

FRAN SPENCER

2. Call to let extremely premature babies die: Guidelines 'dangerous'

Canberra Times
Tuesday, 7 November 2006
Markus Mannheim

Babies born before 26 weeks' gestation should not be resuscitated unless the parents request it, new guidelines recommend.

Parents and doctors in the ACT and NSW have been given a set of principles to help them decide how to treat extremely premature infants, who are more likely to be severely physically and intellectually impaired.

Right-to-life advocates described the guidelines last night as "dangerous", and demanded there be more public debate of the many issues involved.

But the Canberra Hospital's director of paediatrics and child health, Graham Reynolds, said doctors had an obligation to give parents open and honest advice about the risks that faced their babies.

The move coincides with calls in Britain at the weekend for doctors to consider euthanasing "the sickest of newborns".

The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecology argued that the survival of these babies could disable healthy families, saying "active euthanasia" would spare parents the emotional burden and financial hardship of bringing up extremely ill children.

The new ACT and NSW standards, which were approved by a meeting of medical specialists and parents, formally define the so-called birth "grey zone" of between 23 weeks and 25 weeks and six days.

During this time it is acceptable medical practice not to keep the baby alive if parents wish, according to the consensus statement published in the latest Medical Journal of Australia.

Poor condition and the presence of serious anomalies should play a role in decisions about initiating intensive care within the grey zone, lead author Dr Kei Lui, from Sydney's Royal Hospital for Women, said.

She said the care of extremely premature infants demanded a balance between the wishes of the parents, the responsibility of doctors and the likelihood that the child would survive and have an acceptable quality of life.

The president of the ACT Right to Life Association, Kath Woolf, warned yesterday that the guidelines could eventually lead to an "effectively arbitrary" age limit being imposed, with few attempts being made to save younger babies.

She feared the policy had been driven by "purely economic considerations".

"These decisions have to involve careful consideration of each individual case" she said. "We all know that doctors make mistakes, but parents tend to accept their advice as the received wisdom. This seems arbitrary, and that's dangerous."

But Professor Reynolds, who was involved in the consultation that led to the new guidelines, rejected as "nonsense" the claim that the policy was driven by financial concerns.

He said that although parents generally wanted every possible action taken to help their child, "we have to draw the line somewhere".

"Neonatologists have an obligation to talk to parents and tell them what to expect," he said. "At 23 weeks, the outlook is very poor, and what we do can be more harmful than good."

He said the guidelines meant parents would make choices about treatment on the basis of "full and frank discussions".

"Some parents will want us to offer intensive care even though the risk of severe damage is high, but some parents won't be able to accept that risk," he said.

Statistics show that 6.7 per cent of babies are born prematurely in Australia, and one in 100 are born in the grey zone.

Between 1998 and 2000, 897 babies were born between 22 and 25 weeks gestation in NSW and the ACT, but only 481 were alive at birth. Just 183 survived to hospital discharge.

Tests carried out when the babies were two years old showed 37 per cent had some kind of functional disability, which was judged to be severe in 16 per cent of all the surviving children.

The guidelines also advise that women at high risk of delivering in the grey zone should receive counselling.

Source: The Canberra Times

3. A plea and a memory of wonderful times

Sydney Morning Herald
November 4, 2006

Perhaps you read the letter from John Morris of Tweed Heads in the Herald on Wednesday. It was a moving plea for legal euthanasia, the right of the aged and terminally ill to leave this life with dignity.

Mr Morris and his wife, Julie, in their 80s and fearing the onset of Alzheimer's, wish to sweetly die, as he put it, arms entwined, drinking a farewell glass of wine to a Bach cantata.

I call him Mister Morris because he was my sixth-class teacher in primary school. Mister then, Mister now, half a century on.

His letter choked me up, for he was the best teacher I ever had, a man with a rare talent for the education of relentlessly unscholarly pre-adolescent jobs.

Beaky — that was his nickname — taught me a great deal, not least to write a proper English sentence. But it was his subversive humour I remember above all.

A frustrated playwright, for our end-of-year school concert he binned the usual turgid schoolboy dramatic fodder and scripted a show of satirical sketches, which mortally offended almost the entire school community. The year was 1957. You just didn't do satire then.

My role in the atrocity was to sing a famous cigarette advertising jingle of the day. "Light up a Viscount," I trilled in a boyish treble. On stage behind me, a giant portrait of Viscount Montgomery of Alamein went up in flames. The headmaster was outraged.

Go with grace, John and Julie Morris. I will be there at your funeral.
smhcarlton@hotmail.com

4. More Belgians choosing euthanasia

AFP
Fri Nov 10,

BRUSSELS (AFP) - The number of cases of euthanasia is rising in Belgium, four years after the introduction of a law allowing the practice under strict conditions, a medical weekly reported.

The number of euthanasia cases in Belgium, declared by doctors, rose from 17 a month in 2002 when the law came in to force to 31 a month in 2004-2005, and stood at 37 each month for the first part of 2006, Generaliste magazine said.

Of the 742 declared cases in 2004-2005, 54 percent were men.

People with cancer were most likely to choose to take their lives with help, accounting for 83 percent of all declared euthanasia cases. A total of 49 percent of cases concerned the elderly.

Under Belgium's euthanasia law, a person must be "capable and conscious" of the decision they are making and be able to request the procedure in a "willing, thoughtful, and repeated" manner.

To avoid prosecution, a doctor must also be sure that the patient "is in a terminal medical situation" and enduring "constant and unbearable physical or psychological pain" resulting from an accident or incurable illness.

5. Woman poised to take charge

Herald Sun
THU 09 NOV 2006,

By Adam Harvey

NANCY Pelosi is the Democrat that Republicans love to hate. She spearheaded the Democratic takeover of the US House of Representatives yesterday, positioning herself to become the first woman to lead the chamber.

The pro-choice, anti-gun Congresswoman from San Francisco was the star of dozens of Republican television advertisements thanks to her soft stance on illegal immigration, health care and welfare.

On January 3, when she becomes the Majority Leader in the House of Representatives, 66-year-old Ms Pelosi will arguably become the most powerful woman ever elected to office in the US.

Conservatives can't stand her because she's outspoken about their pet peeves. She wants Medicare expanded, supports euthanasia, and believes illegal immigrants in the US deserve access to education and health care.

Conservatives say her home town and her wealth -- about \$30 million, thanks to her husband's investments -- have detached her from the real world.

But unlike other Republican targets, such as Hillary Clinton, Ms Pelosi doesn't have to appeal to voters in the Republican states. She doesn't try to appeal to conservatives, and regularly wins more than 70 per cent of the vote in the most radical city in the US.

But as leader of the House of Representatives, Ms Pelosi may not be the wet that Republicans are expecting. She is a fiscal conservative who says one of her main goals will be to help bring the soaring US budget back under control.

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The Peaceful Pill Handbook by Dr Philip Nitschke & Dr Fiona Stewart

Copies available from www.peacefulpillhandbook.com

Launched in Toronto Sept 2006, now in second printing