



Physician-Assisted Suicide

Edited by Robert F. Weir. 304 pp. Indiana University Press. 1997. US\$29.95. ISBN 0-253-33282-6

Overall rating: Good
Strengths: Relatively short articles, clearly written by some of the leading authorities
Weaknesses: Some repetition; exclusive focus on the US experience
Audience: General

Many of the 10 papers in this collection are written by the most prominent US authorities in bioethics. The book covers the history of Western practice and thought about suicide, arguments about the acceptability of suicide (and of physician participation), possible social policies, and the effect of legalization on vulnerable populations. These papers serve as a solid introduction to the debate.

The central part of the book — papers by Daniel Callahan, Dan Brock, Ira Byock and Howard Brody — deals with the ethical arguments about assisted suicide and physician participation. The editor attempts to separate the issue of physician participation in suicide from the more general ethical issues and the policy issues on the acceptability of assisted suicide. However, the authors reject or ignore this separation; therefore, the papers by Byock and Brody tend to echo what has already been said by Callahan and Brock. Overall, these 4 papers deliver good concise statements of the contending positions rather than fresh ideas.

The book's first section contains some useful historical contributions. But the title of Darrel Amundsen's paper "The significance of inaccurate history in legal considerations of physician-assisted suicide" is misleading. Amundsen spends 24 pages

correcting other writers' inaccurate historical accounts. All he offers concerning the significance of this is the trite observation that judges might have to come to different conclusions if they had a more accurate picture of that history.

According to many legal commentators, the same reasoning that led courts to overturn abortion laws should also lead the courts to strike down laws against assisted suicide. This is an important claim, one that played a significant role in the *Rodriguez* decision.¹ Susan Wolf, noted feminist lawyer, sets out to rebut it. Much of her argument consists of a close reading of the US constitutional law, which will hold little interest for Canadian readers. However, she also offers a provocative argument that laws against abortion and against assisted suicide differ in their effects on women: the former increase women's vulnerability, the latter decrease it. Decriminalizing assisted suicide is likely to affect women adversely. This conclusion dovetails neatly with Kristi Kirschner, Carol Gill and Christine Cassel's arguments that people with disabilities form an especially vulnerable population that is likely to be harmed by any legal acceptance of assisted suicide.

Physician-Assisted Suicide offers the interested reader concise, clear accounts of the major contending positions.

Glenn G. Griener, PhD
Biomedical Ethics
Department of Philosophy
University of Alberta
Edmonton, Alta.

Reference

1. *Sue Rodriguez v. The Attorney General of Canada and the Attorney General of BC*, 3 S.C.R. 519 (1993)

The Rights of the Dying: A Companion for Life's Final Moments

David Kessler. 204 pp. HarperCollins. 1997. \$29.95. ISBN 0-06-018753-0

Overall rating: Fair
Strengths: Hopeful, reassuring style; clear descriptions of dying process from physical and emotional perspectives; helpful discussions; use of case histories

Weaknesses: Sections on pain and symptom management do not include a number of extremely important treatment modalities, thus significantly underestimating the potential for patient comfort; very muddled discussion about "the right to die," often confusing discontinuation of treatment with assisted death — a serious flaw; subjective discussion of spirituality

Audience: "People dealing with life-challenging diseases . . . spouses and companions, parents and children, siblings and friends"

A deep sense of hopefulness and purpose in the midst of difficult circumstances is conveyed in this book, especially through the numerous case histories. Seventeen "Rights of the Dying" form the basis for discussion of issues such as communication, treatment goals, interaction with health care professionals, emotional and spiritual support, the physiology of death; there is a special section on children and death.

Sensible advice is available on many topics, but several areas warrant cautious evaluation. It is disappointing that relating to health care professionals is often described in confrontational terms. For example, "patients must be willing to stand up to doctors who are unwilling to inform them. The stand may take the form of a simple, polite request. It may require cajoling, arguing, or

shouting.” Another deficit is in the discussion of pain and symptom management. The descriptions of pain and suggestions for dealing with pain proactively are helpful, but effective treatment possibilities widely used in palliative care are not mentioned. One glaring omission is the use of an indwelling subcutaneous butterfly needle for administration of medications when the oral route is not possible. Instead, continuous IV medications are recommended, even though they are much more difficult to coordinate in the home setting. The potential for opiate addiction, always a fear for patients, is overstated to the extent that some patients might, as a result, refuse opiate treatment. In addition, the scenarios of intractable pain and dyspnea left serious doubts that every possible palliative measure had been employed.

Some spiritual and emotional advice seems to be based on the author’s opinion alone. “When people ask me if their loved ones can still hear them, I tell them ‘Yes. If not physically, then they can hear you spiritually.’” One danger of this subjectivity is the introduction of uncertainty about the validity of other statements for which scientific documentation is available, although not indicated in the text.

Perhaps the most serious flaw of this book, however, is its confusion of the issues of refusing treatment and deliberate killing. Whatever one’s convictions about physician-assisted death, it is *not* helpful to increase anxiety for patients and families surrounding these issues. Physicians must emphasize that all patients in Canada already have the right to refuse *any* treatment, even life-sustaining treatments. The important advice that patients, their families and their doctors should have a clear mutual understanding of the desires of the patient regarding his or her care is overshadowed by the emotional rhetoric in this section. A strong



warning about this portion of the book would accompany any recommendations I might make to those planning to read it. Physicians suggesting *The Rights of the Dying* to their patients may have other cautions of their own to add.

Margaret Cottle, MD

Palliative Care Consultation Team
Vancouver Hospital and
Health Sciences Centre
University of British Columbia Site
Vancouver, BC

The Complete Allergy Book

June Engel, with Isolde Prince. *Your Personal Health Series*. 318 pp. Illust. Key Porter Books. 1997. \$18.95. ISBN 1-55013-854-5

Overall rating:	Excellent
Strengths:	Accurate, up-to-date, easy to read
Weaknesses:	Few illustrations
Audience:	Layperson

This book is intended for patients, caregivers and the layperson with an interest in allergy. It begins with an overview of allergic mechanisms and common presentations of allergic disorders. It then covers in greater detail disorders such as seasonal and perennial allergic rhinoconjunctivitis, asthma, atopic dermatitis, and food, insect and drug allergies. The author draws on the basic and clinical knowledge of well recognized experts. The result is accurate, scientifically based, up-to-date information that allows the reader to better understand and manage allergic conditions.

Current concepts in immunology and allergy are translated into ideas understandable to the layperson. An exception to this is the discussion of immunologic mechanisms, which would be difficult to understand without an immunology background.

Occasionally, the author uses terminology the implications of which a layperson might not fully appreciate; however, a glossary provides explanations of technical terms.

The intended audience may be interested in more detailed practical advice on the management of allergic disorders than what is provided. Clinical examples are used, but more detail and explanation would be useful. The discussion on atopic dermatitis is especially helpful. A separate chapter for the discussion of allergies in children is an important strength of this book.

Useful features include highlighted discussions to summarize important topics, a table of asthma medications and a list of resource organizations and literature.

The use of photographs rather than drawings, and more illustrations, would have improved the book. Such photographs can be found in Warner and Jackson's *Color Atlas of Pediatric Allergy* (1994, Mosby Year Book, St. Louis).

Overall, this is a clear, well written book that provides accurate and scientifically based information.

Peter K.O. Lee, MD, FRCPC

Consultant in allergy and asthma
for infants, children and adolescents
Kanata, Ont.

Books and other media received

Livres et autres documents reçus

Books for patients

Living With Hepatitis C: A Survivor's Guide. G.T. Everson, H. Weinberg. 204 pp. Illust. Hatherleigh Pr; 212 832-1584. 1998. US\$14.95. ISBN 1-57826-003-5

Special Children, Challenged Parents: The Struggles and Rewards of Raising a Child With a Disability. R.A. Naseef.

222 pp. Birch Lane Pr Book; Canadian Manda Group, Toronto. 1997. US\$21.95. ISBN 1-55972-377-7

Clinical medicine

Chamberlain's Symptoms & Signs in Clinical Medicine: An Introduction to Medical Diagnosis. 12th ed. Edited by C. Ogilvie, C.C. Evans. 392 pp. Illust. Butterworth-Heinemann. 1997. US\$65. ISBN 0-7506-2030-7

Emergency medicine

Life in the Balance. Emergency Medicine and the Quest to Reverse Sudden Death. M.S. Eisenberg. 304 pp. Illust. Oxford U Pr. 1997. \$44.50. ISBN 0-19-510179-0

Genetics

The New Healers: The Promise and Problems of Molecular Medicine in the Twenty-First Century. W.R. Clark. 245 pp. Illust. Oxford U Pr. 1997. \$40.95. ISBN 0-19-511730-1

History

Rheumatic Fever and Streptococcal Infection: Unraveling the Mysteries of a Dread Disease. B.F. Massell. 394 pp. Harvard U Pr. 1997. US\$25. ISBN 0-674-76877-9

HIV/AIDS

American College of Physicians Home Care Guide for HIV and AIDS: For Family and Friends Giving Care at Home. Edited by P.S. Houts. *Home Care Guide Series*. 325 pp. ACP, Philadelphia. 1998. Distributed in Canada by the CMA. \$33.95 (\$26.95, members). ISBN 0-943126-54-1

Homecare

Caregivers. Videos and Guidebook. Director and filmmaker, Dan Curtis. Series of five 50-minute videos. National Film Board of Canada. 1997. *Caregivers Handbook*, free with any order, produced by London InterCommunity Health Centre, J.W. McConnell Family Foundation and Health Canada; available also in French. \$179.95 (series); \$39.95 (each). Order numbers: 193C-9197-119 (series); C9197-049 (part 1); -050 (part 2); -051 (part 3); -052 (part 4); -053 (part 5)