

Netherlands set to legalize long-tolerated euthanasia

For 2 decades, mercy killings and assisted suicide involving terminally ill patients have been widely tolerated in the Netherlands, with prosecution of doctors for such acts becoming increasingly rare.

But with contentious legislation introduced last fall likely to be enacted when parliament resumes after its summer break, Holland will actually decriminalize euthanasia under certain criteria, giving the country the least restrictive laws on mercy killing and assisted suicide in the world. The draft legislation permits physicians to assist in the death of terminally ill patients as young as 12.

Although that age may be raised before the final vote, the core of the bill is not likely to change. Doctors' actions in helping patients die would no longer be routinely reviewed by prosecutors but instead by a committee of doctors, lawyers and ethicists. To qualify for assisted suicide or mercy killing, patients' requests must be "durable," they must face "unbearable suffering" and have no "reasonable alternative" to death. The doctor must also consult at least one other independent physician before helping a patient die.

The bill introduces for the first time the possibility of an "advance directive" so that patients may indicate that they wish to die at a certain point in their illness. This opens the door for patients suffering from dementia and Alzheimer's disease to get help to die if they have signed such a directive early

in their illness. In the past, such patients have not qualified because they were not considered by some to be suffering "unbearably." Although their condition may cause anguish to their families, they themselves may be unaware of their situation.

Dutch lawmakers and health officials say the new legislation aims to ensure that events during a patient's final hours take place in the open, where they can be scrutinized and regulated.

"If it remains a punishable offence, we will never see the transparency that we are aiming for," said Jacob Visser, a spokesperson for the Medical Ethics Division of the Dutch Ministry of Health, which, along with the country's Ministry of Justice, helped shape the legislation. "To get that [transparency], we must get this out of the criminal system." — *Gil Kezwer*, Toronto

MRI used to detect vCJD

Magnetic resonance imaging may be useful in diagnosing variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (*Lancet* 2000;355:1412-8). Thirty-six patients with proven vCJD and 57 control subjects underwent MRI. A bilateral pulvinar high signal was seen in the posterior thalamus in 28 of the 36 cases and in none of the 57 controls (sensitivity 78% [95% CI 60%–90%] and specificity 100% [95% CI 94%–100%]). The pulvinar sign may prove useful in the diagnosis of vCJD.

Bioflavonoids linked to childhood leukemia

In a search for environmental causes of infant leukemia Reiner Strick and colleagues have shown in both in vivo and in vitro experiments that bioflavonoids, commonly found in some fruits and vegetables, may induce chromosomal translocation of the *MLL* gene in utero (*Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 2000;97:4790-5). *MLL* gene translocations occur in about 80% of infants with leukemia.

Potential sperm donors should be tested for HPV

Semen from potential sperm donors should be screened routinely for human papillomavirus (HPV), the virus that causes genital warts and cervical cancer, say Canadian researchers. They are sounding the alarm in light of research showing that the virus can be present even in men with no history of infection and no lesions on their penises, contrary to previous thinking.

In a study involving 85 subjects, University of Saskatchewan researchers detected the virus in sperm samples of 53% of men with past or current infection and in 8% of samples from healthy subjects who had no history of infection. The findings were presented at the recent annual meeting of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in San Francisco.

Using polymerase chain reaction testing, the researchers also found HPV DNA in the sperm of 11% of men with a history of lesions on their penises, but no visible lesions at the time the test was done, compared with 66% of men who had detectable lesions. The 45 HPV-positive volunteers

in the study group had previous or existing lesions, while the control group comprised 40 sperm donors with no signs or history of the disease. The study's findings have generated considerable attention within the medical community, because previously it was thought that HPV was present only in men with genital lesions.

"Clearly, we should be checking for HPV in prospective sperm donors," says Dr. Roger Pierson, with the Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology, and Reproductive Sciences in the University of Saskatchewan College of Medicine. "By excluding those with positive tests, we can prevent transmitting the disease to uninfected sperm recipients." Extrapolating the findings from this small population to all sexually active men, adds Pierson, would suggest it is not only women receiving sperm donations who are at risk of infection.

The researchers also found that standard sperm-washing procedures failed to remove the virus from semen samples. — *Greg Basky*, Saskatoon