

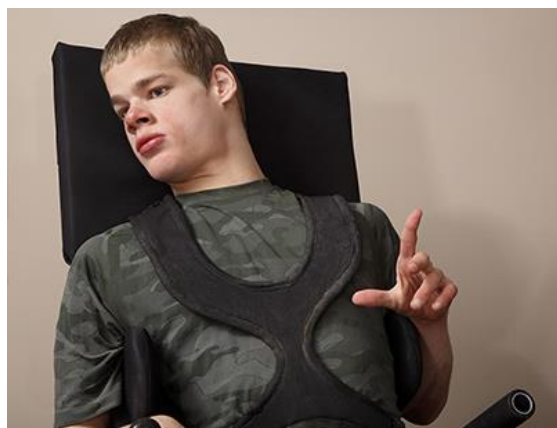


How euthanasia changed Holland

A review of *Do You Call This A Life? Blurred Boundaries in the Netherlands' Right-to-Die Laws* by Gerbert van Loenen

DEREK MIEDEMA

Researcher, Institute of Marriage and Family Canada



Gerbert Van Loenen, a Dutch journalist, once saw Holland's legalization of euthanasia as one of that country's crowning achievements.

This started to change when a friend insisted that Van Loenen's partner Niek would have been better off dead than living with a brain injury. Another acquaintance said to Niek over dinner at their house, "You chose to go on living so you have no right to whine."

These experiences led Van Loenen to wonder. Where did this attitude come from? How did it

become so widely accepted that people living with disability or illness are better off dead? Is the legalization of euthanasia in the Netherlands part of the cause?

Do You Call this a Life? Blurred Boundaries in the Netherlands' Right-to-Die Laws is the result of his research. The book is an objective and exhaustive exposition of what is happening on the ground in the Netherlands with respect to euthanasia. Van Loenen traces changing attitudes through the media, medicine and the courts over time.

He finds that the cultural acceptance of euthanasia has expanded alongside Dutch laws, each step facilitating the next.

"The one thing you cannot do is deny," states Van Loenen, "that the boundaries have been continually pushed back, moving the Netherlands a considerable distance from its original position."¹

The erosion of personal autonomy

We see this reality borne out in the push to legalize the killing of babies. By the early 2000's, Dutch doctors were killing babies born with severe disabilities who could not survive outside the intensive care unit. They did this with parental consent. But in 2005, doctors introduced the Groningen Protocol, which allows doctors to kill babies who *could* survive outside the ICU if they received proper care. Babies with spina bifida are killed (with

parental consent) under the assumption that their lives, whatever their length, will be dominated by pain and suffering. Death, in some Dutch hospitals, is the solution.

Many in Holland see personal autonomy as the reason for legalization. This is similarly true in other countries. These Dutch babies, however, had no choice whether to live or die.

In fact, the entire system of euthanasia in the Netherlands is based not on individual choice but a doctor's choice.

"The case law that has made euthanasia possible in the Netherlands focuses not on the patient, but on the physician and what he is allowed to do," according to Van Loenen.²

"It is easier when the persons who are about to be killed for their own good consent to the termination, but it's not absolutely necessary. In other words, pity – not self-determination, is the essence of the Dutch practice of euthanasia."³

In fact, the expansion of euthanasia has been driven by the medical community, with the courts following.

Van Loenen notes the 1997 case of a doctor who killed a woman at the request of her *family*. The woman made no such request. This killing was against the law.

When this case reached the courts, they merely slapped the doctor on the wrist. "The alarm bells that should go off when physicians engage in illegal termination of life are not working," writes Van Loenen. "While the courts spoke sternly of 'murder,' they only imposed suspended sentences, and hastened to say that this was not really murder."⁴

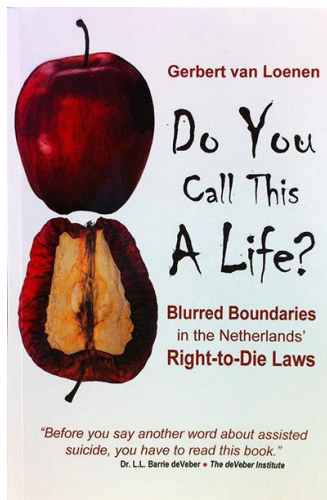
When doctors break the law with little punishment, it becomes easier and easier to flout the law in the future. There are those in the Netherlands who strongly advocate that doctors should be able to choose whether or not to kill a patient in a coma. Given how far the Dutch have already moved on euthanasia, perhaps it is only a matter of time before this becomes accepted practice.

Judging others' lives

The movement by doctors has influenced the courts. And the movement of the law has influenced Dutch citizens. "Ever since they have been allowed to decide for themselves, people in the Netherlands have also started judging other people's lives. What started as self-determination has ended in paternalism towards people who are unable to make their own decisions. This scenario can unfold anywhere."⁵

In this way, legalized euthanasia devalues the lives of many people living with suffering due to disability, old age, chronic illness or traumatic injury.

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This book is an indispensable tool in understanding why legalization of euthanasia is fraught with dangers for people already challenged by serious health issues and offers a depth of understanding beyond the popular media depiction.

In an ideal world, it would be required reading for every MP as they decide how to respond to the Supreme Court ruling striking down Canada's prohibition on assisted suicide.

Do You Call this a Life? Blurred Boundaries in the Netherlands' Right-to-Die Laws is available through the [Euthanasia Prevention Coalition](#) for \$20.

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¹ Van Loenen, G. (2014). *Do you call this a life? Blurred Boundaries in the Netherland's Right to Die Laws*, trans. Maggie Oates. London: Ross Lattner, p. 73.

² *Ibid*, p. 5.

³ *Ibid*, pp. 14-15.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 81.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 195.