

BOOK REVIEW

K.-S. Saternus,¹ Prof. Dr.med.

Review of Shortening of Life, Homicide, and Serial Killing—An Interdisciplinary Analysis of “Euthanasia”

REFERENCE: Oehmichen, M. (ed.). Shortening of Life, Homicide, and Serial Killing—An Interdisciplinary Analysis of “Euthanasia”, Book Series: Research in Legal Medicine, volume 15, Lübeck, Schmidt-Römhild, 1996, 262 pages; DM 48/US \$28.

Originating from a 1995 congress of forensic pathologists in Lübeck (Germany), the articles in this volume present a variegated analysis of the medical and legal, philosophical, and theological aspects of the euthanasia debate in Germany, supplemented by the experience and opinions of authors from neighboring European countries like Holland (*Visser*), Norway (*Rognum*), and Switzerland (*Bär*). The book contains almost 20 articles; although the texts are written in German, each article begins with a summary in English.

The book opens with a survey of the historical background to euthanasia (v. *Engelhardt*, Lübeck) is followed by an exegesis of the term from the legal point of view (*Schewe*, Kiel) and an article on the “patient’s will” (*Koch*, Freiburg). The next articles include a position paper by the German Society for a Humane Death (*Pohlmeier*, Göttingen), a statement by the churches (*Honeker*, Bonn), and medical opinions by a specialist in intensive care (*Schmucker*, Lübeck) and a gerontologist (*Schütz*, Lübeck).

There is a consensus among the authors regarding indirect euthanasia (hastening death is accepted if it results from the administration of necessary pain relievers) and a near consensus regarding passive euthanasia (withholding of life-supportive measures in certain terminally ill patients). Their opinions diverge, however, on the question of “active euthanasia”. Active euthanasia is supported by a large part of the population in Germany—also in Switzerland, Norway and Holland—and explicitly supported in the present volume by *Pohlmeier* and *Visser*. It is, though, not only

rejected by the remaining authors but held by them to be actually dangerous. The first part of the book, therefore, presents a representative picture of the current debate surrounding euthanasia in Germany and its neighbors, supported by in-depth information, details of actual cases, and the authors’ own experiences.

The second part deals with a problem that is alarming to the practicing physician and which can only be understood as the criminal consequence of a deeply held conviction of a large part of the population: Active killing of individual (Miltner et al. Hamburg) or series of elderly or handicapped patients. The latter phenomenon has gained widespread publicity in Germany in recent years due to incidences in Rheinfelden (Friedrich, Freiburg i. Br.), Wuppertal (Daldrup, Düsseldorf), Wien-Lainz (Missliwetz et al., Vienna), Gütersloh (Bajanowski et al., Münster), and Cologne (Käferstein et al., Cologne). These cases are also the subject of an additional analysis from the psychological point of view with particular reference to criminological criteria (Maisch, Hamburg).

The incorporation of such cases in a volume dealing with the broad theme of “euthanasia” makes explicit the full potential for horror latent in this topic, as pointed out by *Wagner* (Homburg/Saar) and expounded upon by *Oehmichen* (Lübeck): The long ongoing debate on the possible decriminalization of active euthanasia has already begun to overthrow the once inviolable and widespread taboo against killing: The threshold to “killing” appears to have been lowered, starting the long and dangerous slide down the slippery slope toward its complete abolition.

The editor has performed the valuable service of drawing particular attention to this aspect of euthanasia in a manner more thorough and comprehensive than has previously been done on this controversial topic. The excellent selection of highly competent authors, the conscientious introduction and concise summary make this book highly explosive politically as well as very exciting reading. Among its virtues is the principled stance it takes against current tendencies toward active euthanasia.

¹Prof. Dr.med., Director, of the Institut für Rechtsmedizin der Universität Göttingen, Göttingen, Germany.