Euthanasia: An Islamic Ethical Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Euthanasia which is defined generally as the deliberate killing of a person for his/her benefit, raises moral and religious questions such as: is it ever right for another person to end the life of a terminally ill patient who is in severe pain or enduring other suffering? Under what circumstances euthanasia is right? In this article we are going to discuss this topic from Islamic perspective through reviewing Islamic primary texts and contemporary Muslim scholar's point of views.

We have used three main sources: a. the Islamic primary source, Holy Koran; b. religious opinions and decrees (Fatwas) from great Muslim scholars; and c. the Islamic codes of medical ethics.

Islamic jurisprudence, based on a convincing interpretation of the holy Koran, does not recognize a person's right to die voluntarily. According to Islamic teachings, life is a divine trust and can not be terminated by any form of active or passive voluntary intervention. There are two instances, however, that could be interpreted as passive assistance in allowing a terminally ill patient to die and would be permissible by Islamic law.

Key words: Euthanasia; Iran; Islam; Medical Ethics

INTRODUCTION

Euthanasia is the deliberate killing of a person for his/her benefit. The word euthanasia comes from the Greek words: ευθανασία (-ευ, eu, "good"), and θάνατος, (thanatos, death).[1] Thus euthanasia means *good death* or *easy death.* It is identified also as "the merciful hastening of death, often limited to willful and merciful actions to kill one who is injured or terminally ill."[2] In the other words, "euthanasia is the termination of the life of the terminally ill patients at their request

or in their interest"[3] Euthanasia is a controversial issue because of conflicting ethical and religious views. Euthanasia raises moral and religious questions, such as: is it ever right for another person to end the life of a terminally ill patient who is in severe pain or enduring other suffering? Under what circumstances euthanasia is right? Is there any moral difference between killing someone and letting him/her die?

All countries are struggling to draft ethical and practical laws governing euthanasia, seeking a practical way for dealing with above mentioned questions. However, the answers of existing philosophical and religious faiths to these questions are different.

It should be noticed that in contrast to countries which have secular governments[4] in most Islamic countries, including Iran, the laws and regulations regarding such subjects as euthanasia are based upon

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Islamic views. Most Iranian scholars and authorities and many in other Muslim countries, regard such topics as jurisprudential and seek the answers from Islamic jurisprudence (Figh). Apart from scholars and authorities, most of people in these countries ask such questions from Islamic scholars and rely on the answers with jurisprudential nature. Islamic jurisprudence has four main sources: The first and the most important one is Holy Koran which is the primary source of Islamic law (although it is not only a book of law); the second source of Islamic law is Sunnah which is what the prophet (and Shiite Imams in the Shiite jurisprudence) said, did or agreed to. The third source is Ijma' which is consensus of Islamic scholars, and the fourth one is Aghl that means reason.

In this article we are going to discuss this topic from Islamic perspective through reviewing Islamic primary texts and contemporary Muslim scholar's point of views.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

We have used 3 main sources to find Islamic views towards euthanasia: First, the Islamic primary source, Holy Koran, which is the most important and reliable source for finding Islamic perspectives, second, religious opinions and decrees (Fatwas) from great Muslim scholars, which are called Mofti Al-Aazam in Sunni tradition and Ayatollah Al-Ozma in Shiite tradition. These Fatwas are important because of the jurisprudential nature of such bioethical topics in Islamic communities. These Fatwas are uppermost jurisprudential dicta among most of Islam's believers in the Islamic world. And third, the Islamic codes of medical ethics which are the results of discussions and consensus among Muslim experts and scholars in these regard.

We also used some articles and books, from the library of the Medical Ethics and History of Medicine Research Centre of Tehran University of Medical Sciences and using search engines and databases including Google, PubMed and digital library of Tehran University of Medical Sciences. Search terms included *euthanasia, Mercy Killing, Assisted Suicide, Islamic* and *Islam*.

Finally, we tired to find the answers to most important questions regarding Euthanasia, from Islamic perspective.

RESULTS

According to our three main sources, we can classify our findings, to three parts: euthanasia in Holy Koran, in Fatwas or religious rulings of Great Muslim scholars, and in other text including codes, regulations and scientific articles.

Holy Koran: We can classify related verses to two parts: 1. Verses on the sacredness of life. We mention two related verses: a. *"Do not take life, which Allah made sacred, other than in the course of justice."*(Quran 17.33) b. *"If anyone kills a person - unless it is for murder or spreading mischief in the land - it would be as if he killed the whole people."*(Qur'an 5:32) And 2- Verses on that death is the exclusive action of God, here we also mention two verses: a. *"When their time comes they cannot delay it for a single hour nor can they bring it forward by a single hour."*(Qur'an 16:61) b. *"And no person can ever die except by Allah's leave and at an appointed term."* (Quran 3.145)

Fatwas (Statements of Great Muslim Scholars): Saudi Arabia's grand mufti *Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Abdullah bin Baz* has ruled that Euthanasia or mercy killing (removing life supporting apparatuses keeping alive a person inflicted with an incurable disease or under coma) is un-Islamic. The top jurisprudential authority of Saudi Arabia headed by Sheikh Bin Baz said it was against Sharia to decide the death of a person before he is actually dead. He said life of no person can be taken away for any reason.[5]

The popular Egyptian scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, recently issued a fatwa, or religious ruling, equating euthanasia with murder, but allowing the withholding of treatment that is deemed useless.[6]

Dr. Muzzami Siddiqi, former president of the Islamic Society of North America, wrote recently. "If the patient is on life support, it may be permissible, with due consideration and care, to decide to switch off the life-support machine and let nature take its own time."

Ayatollah Khamanei leader of Islamic Republic of Iran, as a Shiite Muslim scholar, also has issued a fatwa

considering euthanasia "in all forms" forbidden (haram) (7) Ayatollah Nuri Hamadani another Shiite Ayatollah also regards all forms of euthanasia as haram.[8]

Islamic Code of Medical Ethics: The Islamic Code of Medical Ethics, issued by the First International Conference on Islamic Medicine held in Kuwait, in 1981, states: "In his/her defense of life, however, the doctor is well advised to realize his limit and not transgress it. If it is scientifically certain that life cannot be restored, then it is futile to diligently keep the patient in a vegetative state by heroic means or to preserve the patient by deep freezing or other artificial methods. It is the process of life that the doctor aims to maintain and not the process of dying. In any case, the doctor shall not take a positive measure to terminate the patient's life".[9]

Two articles of "The Islamic Code for Medical and Health Ethics" are devoted to the *Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Death*. Article sixty one: "Human life is sacred, and it should never be wasted except in the cases specified by shari'a and the law. This is a question that lies completely outside the scope of the medical profession. A physician should not take an active part in terminating the life of a patient, even if it is at his or her guardian's request, and even if the reason is severe deformity; a hopeless, incurable disease; or severe, unbearable pain that cannot be alleviated by the usual pain killers. The physician should urge his patient to endure and remind him of the reward of those who tolerate their suffering. This particularly applies to the following cases of what is known as mercy killing: *a.* the deliberate killing of a person who voluntarily asks for his life to be ended; *b.* physician-assisted suicide; and *c.* the deliberate killing of newly born infants with deformities that may or may not threaten their lives.

Article Sixty-Two: "The following cases are examples of what is not covered by the term "mercy killing": *a.* the termination of a treatment when its continuation is confirmed, by the medical committee concerned, to be useless, and this includes artificial respirators, in as much as allowed by existing laws and regulations; *b.* declining to begin a treatment that is confirmed to be useless; and *c.* The intensified administration of a strong medication to stop a severe

pain, although it is known that this medication might ultimately end the patient's life."[10]

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSSION

Islamic jurisprudence, based on a convincing interpretation of the holy Koran, does not recognize a person's right to die voluntarily. The Islamic arguments against euthanasia can be summarized in two main reasons: 1-Life is sacred and euthanasia and suicide are not included among the reasons allowed for killing in Islam. And 2-Allah decides how long each of us will live and two verses support this reason.

According to Islamic teachings, life is a divine trust and can not be terminated by any form of active or passive voluntary intervention.[11] All the Islamic scholars regard active euthanasia as forbidden (Hiram) and there is no difference between Sunni and Shiite schools.

The moment of death, ajal, is under the control of Allah and the human has no say in this matter; the human can not and should not attempt to hasten or delay the ajal. The prohibition on life applies equally well whether for self, suicide, or others, homicide or genocide. The concepts of autonomy, freedom and individual choice does not apply here for these two reasons: *a.* life does not belong to the human; and *b.* taking life will cause harm to the family and society in general. An individual's freedom of choice is constrained by the harm it causes to others.

Justifying the stance of advocates of euthanasia on the basis of other factors such as economic concerns, consideration of resources that could otherwise be utilized by other patients and death with dignity does not seem plausible because of crime nature of mercy killing in Islamic point of view.[3] Of course, we have to exclude the situation in which the life support equipments are switched off from a brain-dead person, aimed to use them for saving the life of a live person.

As a conclusion we can say that the Islamic position is that life belongs to Allah. It is He who gives and takes away life. No human can give or take it. Muslims are against euthanasia. They believe that all human life is sacred because it is given by Allah, and that Allah chooses how long each person will live. Human beings should not interfere in this.

There are two instances, however, that could be interpreted as passive assistance in allowing a terminally ill patient to die and would be permissible by Islamic law: Administering analgesic agents that might shorten the patient's life, with the purpose of relieving the physical pain or mental distress, and withdrawing a futile treatment in the basis of informed consent (of the immediate family members who act on the professional advice of the physicians in charge of the case) allowing death to take its natural course.[11]

If a patient is medically presumed dead through what is known as brain death, switching off the life support may be permissible, with due consultation and care, especially when it is clear that the life support machine becomes of no use for the already-dead patient or in the case of organ and tissue donation for saving another persons' life which is a routine practice in Iran and some other Muslim countries. Regarding end-stage dementic patients, they should be considered as completely human being and according to Islamic teachings; their life is scared and should not be taken.

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