

Case 9: A Child's Right to Die

A law recently passed in Belgium allows certain terminally ill children to choose euthanasia. For the law to apply, a child must not only be terminally ill but also close to death and in great pain. The child must be able to show that he or she understands the consequences of his or her decision, the child's parents must consent, and the child's medical team must approve.³⁸ The Belgian law is the first of its kind without an age limit, though the Netherlands has a similar law that applies to children over twelve. And even though euthanasia for adults has been legal in Belgium for over a decade, some people believe the new law goes too far.

Protestors argue that children simply cannot make such difficult decisions and that modern medicine can alleviate much of an ill child's pain. As one newspaper put it, "Belgium has allowed the killing on demand of terminally ill children and has headed for the ethical abyss. A state which allows something like this is a failing state."³⁹ Religious leaders believe the law is immoral: "The law says adolescents cannot make important decisions on economic or emotional issues, but suddenly they've become able to decide that someone should make them die," one Belgian archbishop commented.⁴⁰ And backlash has been especially harsh abroad: for example, the chairman of Forbes Media went so far as to suggest that allowing euthanasia for children would put us "on the malignantly slippery slope to becoming a society like that envisioned by Nazi Germany, one in which 'undesirables' are disposed of like used tissue."⁴¹

Protestors point to stories like that of Godelieva De Troyer to support their opposition. De Troyer died two years ago. She was 64 years old and in perfect physical health. She was also severely depressed. She emailed her son, Dr. Tom Mortier, to tell him she was looking into euthanasia. He assumed that her doctors would never allow it because she was not physically ill. But only three months after her email, Dr. Mortier got a call at work informing him that his mother had been euthanized. He was completely enraged, and has since become an outspoken critic of Belgium's euthanasia law. "This is suicide with the approval of society," he believes.⁴² Allowing children to also choose euthanasia would only allow for more abuse.

Despite this vehement opposition, the law is widely supported in Belgium. Supporters assert that it would only apply in an extremely small number of cases and that each child would have to be very clear about his or her wish to die. Indeed, only five children have requested euthanasia

³⁸ Charlotte McDonald-Gibson, "Belgium Extends Euthanasia Law to Kids," TIME, February 13, 2014, <http://time.com/7565/belgium-euthanasia-law-children-assisted-suicide/>.

³⁹ Robert-Jan Bartunek, "Belgium Surprised at International Euthanasia Backlash," Reuters, February 14, 2014, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/02/14/us-belgium-euthanasia-idUSBREA1C0UF20140214>

⁴⁰ "Belgium's Parliament Votes through Child Euthanasia," BBC News, February 13, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-26181615>

⁴¹ Steve Forbes, "Will U.S. Kill Kids in Name of Compassion?" Forbes, January 6, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/steveforbes/2014/01/06/hitlercare/>

⁴² Graeme Hamilton, " 'Suicide with the approval of society': Belgian activist warns of slippery slope as euthanasia becomes 'normal,' " National Post, November 24, 2013, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/11/24/suicide-with-the-approval-of-society-belgian-activist-warns-of-slippery-slope-as-euthanasia-becomes-normal/>

in the Netherlands since 2002.⁴³ As one Belgian Senator has noted, "What is scandalous is the suffering of sick children when they are going to die."⁴⁴

Supporters point to stories like that of Danny Bond. Bond was born with a bowel disease that caused him excruciating pain. At thirteen years old, he started talking about killing himself. Indeed, he did try to kill himself three times. When his mother resuscitated him after his third suicide attempt, he told her that she had let him down by saving him. His condition worsened shortly after he turned twenty-one, and he told his parents that he wanted to die and that he wanted their help. But they knew that assisting him would be a crime. Ultimately, he starved himself to death and asked his parents to stay by his bedside to make sure that his doctors did not treat him. "All he wanted was the privilege to be given an injection that would kill him instantly in seconds, and I had to watch him die in days," his mother lamented.⁴⁵

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⁴³ Laura Smith-Spark and Diana Magnay, "Belgium: Lawmakers Vote for Children's 'Right to Die' Euthanasia Law," CNN, February 13, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/02/13/world/europe/belgium-euthanasia-law-children/>

⁴⁴ Dan Bilefsky, "Belgium Close to Allowing Euthanasia for Ill Minors," New York Times, February 13, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/14/world/europe/belgium-close-to-enacting-sick-child-euthanasia-law.html?_r=0

⁴⁵ Paul Valley, "Child euthanasia: Too hard to live, too young to die," The Independent, February 16, 2014, <http://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/health-and-families/health-news/child-euthanasia-too-hard-to-live-too-young-to-die-9131089.html>