

## Euthanasia: professional positioning in a social debate

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It's easy to make up your mind,  
 but convincing your heart  
 is the hard part.

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- Current situation regarding social and professional positioning of euthanasia in NZ
- The use of 'language' to describe euthanasia and its impact on nursing practice
- Defining documents that guide our professional practice and care decisions
- Philosophy of palliative care and its guiding principles

### Current situation in New Zealand

- Euthanasia is illegal in NZ
- Increasing social interest in euthanasia in NZ and across developed countries
- Polarized views now exist between professional groups and those who support euthanasia
  - NZ Medical Association
  - Hospice New Zealand
  - Palliative Care Council
  - Australia and NZ Palliative Medicine
  - Palliative Care Nurses NZ
  - Health Alliance



### How relevant are our views?



### Medical Paternalism

- Relatively outdated concept now (pre 1990)
- Assumes an individual is unable to make their own health decisions
- The values expressed by doctors are often accepted by patients
- Evolved to become a patient centered decision making model
- Underpinned by the dominant Western principle of individual autonomy and self determination

## NZ Bill of Rights 1990

- Right to refuse life saving treatment
- Consent must be gained for any invasive procedure
- Advance care plans outlining choices should they become incompetent are legally enforceable
- Underpinned by the principle of self determination – we are allowed to make our own medical decisions throughout our life



## Tensions between....

- Individual autonomy (self determination and free will)
  - Beneficence (to do only good)
  - Non-malificence (to do no harm)
- Which is the over riding principle?



“Physician assisted suicide/physician assisted death”

- Disregards others involved in the care of the patient
- Patients decisions regarding their end of life care impact on others Physicians decisions impact on those involved in caring
- Nurses are the biggest health professional group involved in palliative and end of life care

## Euthanasia is illegal....



## But then what?



**Thinking outside the box** (also thinking out of the box or thinking beyond the box) is a metaphor that means to think differently, unconventionally, or from a new perspective.



## Nurses Code of conduct

- Respect the dignity and individuality of health consumers
- Listen to health consumers, ask for and respect their views about their health
- Practise in a way that respects difference and does not discriminate against those in your care on the basis of opinion
- You have a right not to be involved in care to which you object on the grounds of conscience
- Practise in a way that respects each health consumer's identity and right to hold personal beliefs, values and goals.



## Patient Code of Rights

- To be treated fairly without pressure or discrimination
- The right to dignity and independence
- To make your own decisions about your care



## Principles of palliative care

- Respect for individual
- Loss of personal control increases as death nears
- Choice is an expression of personal control
- Supporting choice and achieving preferences at the end of life are intrinsically linked to the delivery of quality palliative care

"...autonomy is a key human right and maintaining this must be a core ethical value for society and health services." (WHO 2004)

## An individual debate.....

- Should we judge those who choose what we ourselves would not choose at the end of life?
- How do we provide care that is not supported by our profession but is legal?
- How do we support our colleagues who choose not to provide care?
- Are we certain we would not choose the same thing if we were in their position?

## A social debate.....

