

Euthanasia

This year the Netherlands finally legalised voluntary euthanasia. Although this has done little more than give legitimacy to what has been happening for decades, it is probable that euthanasia which is not voluntary will continue at about one in three of all euthanasia deaths, and that respect for human life will diminish further. Belgium and France may be tempted to follow suit, although the World Medical Association has strongly condemned the Dutch decision and called on doctors there to ignore it and to practise ethically.

In the UK the front door to euthanasia remains firmly closed, though there are always back door possibilities through deliberate omissions which have the intention to kill.

Prayer

Lord, please may the Netherlands even now overturn this decision, and may no other countries follow. Please help us to know how to care ethically for the terminally ill, recognising that there is 'a time to die' but never hastening death.

Cloning

Parliament has voted to allow so-called 'therapeutic cloning' in an extension of the 1990 Human Fertilisation Embryology Act. This would allow use of human embryos as a source of embryonic stem cells, which could be cultured and turned into different types of tissue to replace that lost by injury or disease. Cloned tissues would not be rejected after transplant.

Stem cell research – **YES**. Stem cells can be extracted from 'adult' sources and here there is no ethical controversy. Encouraging research is emerging all the time.

Using human embryos as a means to an end, and perfecting techniques which could lead in time to the birth of a baby created by reproductive cloning - **NO**.

A House of Lords Select Committee is reviewing Parliament's decisions, and no licences for embryonic stem cell work (and therapeutic cloning) can be issued until they report. There is also a High Court review about the definition of 'embryo' in the 1990 Act, so cloning is not yet being performed.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that we are all fearfully and wonderfully made. Please help us to respect human life and keep us from trespassing in your domain. Please lead us into adult stem cell research rather than into cloning humans.

Abortion

One in five of all pregnancies in England and Wales still ends in abortion, with provisional figures for 2000 showing 185,000 deaths. Campaigners are attempting to extend the 1967 Abortion Act to Northern Ireland and a Dutch-registered 'floating abortion clinic' moored off Dublin for a while this summer. Although no abortions took place, this was a propagandist challenge to the situation in Ireland.

Meanwhile the number of Care for Life crisis pregnancy counselling centres continues to grow. Prayer and practical help for the pregnant, together with teaching and modelling Christian marriage to try to prevent 'unwanted' pregnancy, are the ways ahead.

Prayer

Lord, thank you for marriage, your loving plan for human sexuality, and for the gift of children. Please forgive us for the adultery and fornication in our society, and for killing defenceless innocents in abortion. We pray this may stop. We pray for those distressed by crisis pregnancies and for the Christians ministering to them.

HIV-AIDS

It was recently reported that, worldwide, 23 million people have now died of AIDS and another 55 million are expected to die by 2010. The problem is relatively stable in the West, but is greatest in sub-Saharan Africa, with Asia catching up fast.

It is hard to get our minds around figures like these - 'one death is a tragedy; a million is a statistic'. Perhaps the following comment will make the statistics more real: a nurse recently reported that at her hospital in Zambia, about half the nurses in training died of AIDS before they graduated.

Prayer

Lord, help us to take it in. Help us to pray. Help us to care. Help us to do something about it. Above all, Lord, please have mercy.

Genetics

Work to finalise the definitive listing of the 'human genome' continues and there have been major consultations on the ethical implications of genetic databases and on behavioural genetics. It can never be true that 'my genes made me do it', but there is a real danger of a further erosion in moral responsibility.

The nature-nurture debate rages on, as sex-selection by sperm sorting and pre-implantation genetic diagnosis bring 'designer babies' ever nearer.

Prayer

Lord, thank you that we are all made in your image. Thank you that scientific research is teaching us more about the ways in which you made us. Please grant us wisdom to use this knowledge for good alone.

The global picture

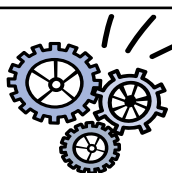
Resource allocation becomes ever more controversial in rich Britain, but in the developing world budgets for healthcare are unbelievably tiny by comparison. More needs to be done politically in terms of international aid and debt relief, but there is always a need for health professionals and aid workers to take the compassionate care of Christ to the needy.

Prayer

Father, forgive us that we complain so readily and that we forget the far greater needs elsewhere. Please help us to give generously and please call out more carers into a world of such need.

Dr Andrew Fergusson

Medical Adviser, CARE (Christian Action Research & Education)



Action points

We can pray. We can also get more informed and get more involved. We could respond all year round to Healthcare Sunday by, for example, lobbying on ethical issues, volunteering at an old people's home, helping at a crisis pregnancy counselling centre, or visiting at the local hospice. We could support a health professional working in the developing world, or consider going to work abroad ourselves, either short term or long term.

