

Letter to the Editor

Auto Euthanasia Request: An Ethical and Moral Dilemma

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Respected Sir,

This letter provides the ethical and clinical elaboration of auto-euthanasia in elderly couples, a previously unexplored phenomenon in the Indian perspective. A couple undergoing treatment for geriatric depression with a psychiatrist strongly wish to die together at a self-directed moment, despite not suffering from a life-threatening disease but having moderate depression. The couple was living by themselves and all the children are abroad.

Auto-euthanasia with self-determination and a wish to die is presented here in light of geriatric mental health issues. The decision to end life is largely based on the anticipatory fear of further deterioration and no help available as well as how one would live without the other depending on whose death occurs first. The couple's need for auto-euthanasia was an obstacle that had to be overcome and their concerns differed from the concerns voiced by the treating psychiatrist. The role of depression in leading to their need for auto-euthanasia is also questioned. Various clinical and ethical issues are elucidated that a treating doctor may encounter when working with such cases [1].

Double self-euthanasia is a term (or double auto-euthanasia) is a term used to refer to a couple's intentional act to end his or her life independently; based on a persistent wish to die; decided after careful consideration; implemented in a careful manner and associated with self-deliverance, self-determination, reasonability, rationality, and dispassion [1].

This case explores the complex clinical and ethical issues that surround a case of an elderly couple wishing to engage in spousal self-euthanasia on grounds that they had lived their life and that life was not worth living any more. The strongly desired to die at a predetermined time and moment though they did not suffer from any life threatening disorder except moderate depression [1].

Key Issues that Came Up in the Clinical Interview

- Both had reached a state of embodiment where they felt threatened by their own bodies [2].
- Both had reached a temporal impasse where they did not wish to deteriorate further.
- They were both socially and emotionally empty and full at the same time – a rare feat.

- Two individuals with highly intertwined lives were the subjects involved here.
- Concept of emotional emptiness and concept of self-identity in both the members needed further exploration.
- There was also a strong sense of feeling complete in their lives.
- No pressure or coercion present in their request.
- Both were mentally competent and denied that their actions were as a result of depression - but how could one assess and explain this clinically.
- Both were fully aware of the emotional implications of such a decision and wanted to discuss the same with their children.
- A self-appointed time of death seen as a way of regaining full control on their life.
- The need for the doctor to distinguish between suicidal thoughts in depression and pure death wishes is paramount in this case.
- Does one have the right to end one's life the way he or she wants to – is the eternal ethical and moral question ?
- Should this phenomenon looked at clinically or should we also assess the existential and phenomenological aspects in addition to the ethical aspects ?
- What role does the treating doctor and psychiatrist play in this case and the ethico-legal implications in such cases.
- These and many such issues shall come up in the future when more such cases may come to a treating doctor for advice or opinion [3].

Yours sincerely,
Dr. Avinash De Sousa

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