

Explaining Euthanasia... or not

A week ago today our local rag, *The Advocate*, did a spread on local state politician Adam Brooks. It's a decent feel-good bio piece and certainly echoes the likeability of the man I have personally encountered once or twice.

Part way through one part of the spread there is commentary on Brooksy's apparent conservatism:

He does not support gay marriage.

A photograph of a newspaper clipping from The Advocate. The text is as follows: "He does not support gay marriage. "I feel marriage is between a man and a woman," he said. On voluntary euthanasia, he "absolutely supports freedom of choice". "However, I have some very serious concerns around the legislation side of voluntary euthanasia."

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Let me pick up on his point about euthanasia. It's something that is topical here in Tasmania as legislation for the legalising of euthanasia is likely to come before the parliament some time this year.

What Adam Brooks is doing is articulating a very common view:

It's all about personal choice, so as long as we get the implementation details right, active euthanasia is fine. Or perhaps: There is nothing wrong with active euthanasia as long as we do it "properly."

Here's the problem for Brooksy on this: In order to figure out what "properly" means (and so alleviate "concerns around

the legislation”) you need to articulate a principled approach for why euthanasia is “proper” at all, and then apply it. “Freedom of choice” does not meet that need.



Active

euthanasia is premised on someone asserting the following: “I want someone to end my life” It is not just a personal and private affair because it involves someone else (including the health system if active euthanasia were to be legalised). And so the issue is not, firstly, *how* we might respond positively to that assertion (a simple implementation detail) – but *should* we respond positively to that assertion?

Brooksy obviously thinks we should because it’s about “freedom of choice.”

But surely it isn’t an absolute freedom of choice? Does anyone, anywhere, at any time have the right to involve someone else in a decision to end their life? And should the person so involved acquiesce? Our default response is to say “No, it is wrong to aid someone in suicide.” In fact, in virtually all circumstances we would seek to convince someone not to exercise their choice for suicide – and in fact we would have an expectation that a friend or carer would actively work to *undermine* such a choice. I doubt Adam Brooks would disagree.

So he doesn’t “absolutely support freedom of choice” at all really. He, I’m sure, supports freedom of choice in this area only in certain circumstances.

But which circumstances? And why?

Should there be freedom of choice when someone is terminally ill? or terminally ill at a certain point in the prognosis? or in pain? any pain whatsoever? or in pain beyond a certain threshold? as determined by... who? or simply unable to live a life of quality? where quality of life is determined by... who?

The problem is, of course, that in the end these questions come down to the value placed on human existence. If active euthanasia is proper and right then the following consideration is also proper and right – “Before some threshold determination of quality of life, we will defend for and care for your life as best we are able and sometimes in spite of your desire to live. After that threshold we may agree that your life is not worth living any more.”

This is where “freedom of choice” takes us. This is where a further principle about quality of life and the nature of human existence must be considered and expounded. Adam Brooks hasn’t told us what he thinks about that.

The debate then has two levels.

At the first level: Should we countenance this consideration at all? Is it right or wrong for government to set a determinative level on the quality and value of human life?

Those who answer “No” are making an active decision. The application of their decision is clear – vote against any attempt to legalise active euthanasia.

The second level is for those who answer “Yes” to the first. It is for those who are willing to attempt to put some threshold value on human existence. The application for them is fraught: they must then tell us what that threshold value is, and how and why it is such and for whom.

I’m sure Brooksy realises that this debate is more than just

one-liners in The Advocate. But by that one line he has shown what he thinks is right and what is wrong at the first level.

But “freedom of choice” does not fully explain that conclusion – nor does it let us know on what basis he will grapple with the terrible practicalities that consequentially follow.

He needs to make himself, and his principles, clearer.