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AUTHOR

Matthews, Pia

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Book review: Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide, Lessons from Belgium

D.A. Jones, C. Gastmans, C. MacKellar (eds) (Cambridge: CUP, 2017)

Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide, Lessons from Belgium is part of a series of books from the Cambridge University Press where the focus is to ground theoretical debate in the realities of law and medical practice. The book does precisely this and more. Although the book does not restrict itself to the situation in Belgium, Belgium provides the largest body of empirical research as indicated by the editors. However the authors draw upon this research not simply to describe realities. In addition the book presents a critical consideration of how changes in the law on euthanasia and assisted suicide impact society. Significantly, the book presents diverse ethical viewpoints ensuring that this consideration is balanced. This makes the book a necessary resource where there is debate on the legalisation of euthanasia or assisted suicide. Important lessons can be drawn on issues concerning transparency, proper and accurate reporting, the normalisation of the practice of euthanasia, the problem of neglect in areas of end of life care and palliative care. The book also deals with deep sedation as an accepted treatment, organ donation and euthanasia, and concerns of unwarranted developments in euthanasia practice as well as extension of euthanasia to children and people with mental health issues. The book is set out in four parts: Part I deals with legislation in Belgium alongside other jurisdictions of Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and the USA. Part II explores the practice of euthanasia in connection with end of life care from continuous sedation to palliative care, and the vexed question of organ donation and death by euthanasia. Part III considers particular vulnerable groups including children, people with dementia and people with disabilities as well as those suffering from psychiatric illnesses and those who are 'tired of life'. Part IV draws the discussion to a close with a look at some consequences of the Belgium legislation on euthanasia and its effect on culture and normalisation of the practice. The list of contributing authors is impressive and it demonstrates expertise in bioethics, philosophy, law and clinical practice. The last word perhaps should go to Kevin Fitzpatrick who died before completing his chapter on disability and euthanasia, and to whom the book is dedicated. Fitzpatrick draws attention to the hard cases where the fear of living with disability and dependence seems to justify euthanasia. As Fitzpatrick notes, key to the debate is the question of dependency. Conversations around euthanasia and assisted suicide that avoid discussion of disability, attitudes to dependency, support, interdependence and how to adjust to the realities of living a life of disability, never address the roots of the question. Fitzpatrick ends his chapter with a quote from Baroness Helena Kennedy that sums up what this book and the lessons it draws is all about: the conversation about euthanasia and assisted suicide is 'about the kind of society we want to live in'.