

LETTER TO EDITOR

CAN WE MAKE DEATH AN INEVITABLE EVENT MORE HUMANE?

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We all know that life is a journey between birth and the inevitable end, which is death. This means that once there is birth, death has to happen. Of course timing of death after birth is not always predictable. By social conditioning, birth is a time to rejoice, but death, a time to mourn which means death can cause immense pain and suffering not only to the person with terminal illness or extreme old age but also to the immediate family members and friends. So it has become important to provide such people emotional, spiritual and physical support.

Death may occur suddenly as in accidents, some physical ailments, natural calamities etc. Nothing much can be done in these situations except providing support / counseling to the surviving near and dear. But death due to old age and some incurable disease are to some extent predictable. We can strive to make their terminal life less painful and more meaningful as care providers.¹ One must realize that he should give the maximum to the society while alive since he can carry nothing at the time of departure from this world. The contents of a book 'Die empty' by Todd Henry will be useful in communicating with these individuals.²

It is the wish of every human being to die without much pain & discomfort and not being dependent on another individual for their survival. But often, the individual may not have control over these issues. People may at least like to have a 'good death'. Death is considered by some as "Good" under the following conditions:

1. When the individual has good relationship and communication with the care givers which ensure care till the end.
2. He is relatively free from pain, discomfort and psychological stress
3. He/ she has autonomy in deciding treatment options and discontinue treatment when the outcome is known to be unfavorable. Everyone should have autonomy on his body. In the case of very young children, unconscious patients and those with special needs who cannot take independent decisions, the legal guardian should take decision.^{1,3}

What are the options available for the individuals and care givers? Ending one's own life at the terminal stage is probably not the right answer and is also not legal in many countries. Another is to withhold or withdraw treatment. One must differentiate between withholding and withdrawing treatment. Withholding treatment can be better described by an example when, a terminally ill patient sustains cardiac arrest, reviving him and placing him on a ventilator for prolonging life may not be acceptable to many. When it is obvious that nothing will reverse the condition, not prolonging life is withholding treatment. Sometimes, the patient may be serious but the family cannot afford to continue critical care treatment and they may request for stopping life support. Withdrawing

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life support due to non-affordability is probably not justified. Often some people may not receive even basic care while the others will receive too much of care without favorable outcome. It has become a major problem in low - middle income countries with large population and increasing age of survival The care provided is based on the status of the individual in the society rather than the actual requirement.⁴

The most feasible option seems to be 'end of life care' or 'Palliative care'. It should be made available to all sections of society irrespective of their so-

cio-economic status. It should be made available in all hospitals, health care facilities and even at home. Domiciliary palliative care may be more acceptable when the illness is prolonged and the individual requires only supportive care. This will reduce the cost and be more affordable /acceptable to the family members. The Kerala model of care provided by 'Pallium India' is worth following. Effective palliative care is a multi-disciplinary approach that includes doctors, nurses, family members, volunteers, philanthropists, administrators etc.

How the services will be funded? It should be supported by family members, volunteers, Government agencies and philanthropists. It is not possible to give institutional care for everyone. Institutional care is required only for those who do not have family support and those who require specialized care. But we need to have manpower for training and supporting family members and care takers at home. There are fresh problems faced by the society as a whole, due to increased life expectancy, more nuclear families with children and close relatives living far away. The newer concept of assisted living is probably helps in providing better life for the elderly. But many people cannot afford the cost of such assisted living ^{1,4}.

Death is declared by physicians when the physiological functions like cardiac and respiratory activities stop. At home, death may be declared by an elderly person who has witnessed such events earlier. However, cellular death occurs much later depending on the condition in which the body is kept. The body cells will be active for some time and this makes organ transplantation possible. The family and friends may find the organ donation as a gesture of good will and a continuity life of their loved one after death ^{4,5}.

Once death is declared other formalities have to follow. Death may be considered as a spiritual process rather than a physiological event by some. Many people believe in life after death and the process of rebirth. The concept of rebirth and carrying forwards

the fruits of good work may make people help and support others in their need. People have described 'near death experience'. It is not clear whether they are real or just an imagination?.

Prayers and spiritual rituals are conducted after death based on religious guidelines. Many believe that the soul is eternal and the physical body has limited life. It is important that family and friends should find solace and come out of their grief by performing these rituals.

In conclusion, it may be said that death cannot be prevented or reversed but the event can be made more humane so that people accept the loss and find peace for themselves.

Declaration: Although some information is that of the author, major write up is based on earlier publications.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST
Authors declare no conflict of interest.
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