

Office Hours: **Death & Dying**

Some students were interested to hear more about what I referred to as the "standard consensus" on the ethics of end-of-life decisions.

»»» So, what is the **standard consensus**? What are its **elements**?

When I refer to the "standard consensus," I have in mind **a set of moral rules** that have prevailed throughout the last century (and for a substantial time before that). For those in the United States this consensus is reflected in American law, the major report of the U.S. President's Commission on Deciding to Forego Life-Sustaining Treatment, and the positions of the American Medical Association and many other health professional associations.

It is also reflected in the mainstream of Roman Catholic moral theology, much Protestant and secular thinking. Jewish Talmudic law only partially supported this consensus in that it traditionally has opposed forgoing life-support as well as active, intentional killing for mercy. It is harder to summarize the extent to which other countries share this consensus, but at least many do.

The obvious exception is the recent opening to active, intentional killing for mercy (what is sometimes called "active euthanasia") in The Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg, but even these countries, prior to their recent policy changes, shared the consensus. Similarly, a few states in the U.S. have now departed from this consensus when it comes to physician-assisted suicide.

Eastern cultures are in some cases heavily influenced by this consensus as well. It is often reflected in international medical ethical documents.

»»» What are its **elements**?

The major elements of the standard consensus are:

1. Intentional killing (direct killing) is unethical.
2. It is acceptable to forgoing life-support when the intervention does not offer more benefit than burden.
3. Withdrawing life-support is morally the same as not starting it in the first place.

4. Treatments deemed to offer greater benefit than burden are called “ordinary” and those that do not are called “extraordinary.”

A **brain-based definition of death** in which humans are classified as dead when there is irreversible loss of all functions of the entire brain (as measured by standard criteria sets) is now often part of this consensus.

Thanks for your interest, and being a part of the course. It has been a remarkable experience for us all.

Bob