
NAVIGATE THE NET

Cindy A. Gruwell and Dawn Littleton, Column Editors

Editors' Note

Practicing librarians know that many health-related topics, for example, abortion, cloning, euthanasia, can be extremely controversial. Seekers of information about controversial issues are faced with a multitude of challenges to find neutral information. These challenges include finding more highly charged rhetoric than unbiased facts, filtering out one's own strongly held position, and requiring information on many non-care issues, for example, ethical, cultural, social, legal, political, and economic implications. A guide to the topic "euthanasia" is presented to users seeking balanced and neutral resources. The editors hope that this second article in the "Controversial Issues" series will assist librarians and information specialists in finding unbiased and reasoned information on the topic. We invite additional submissions by authors willing to provide guidance in other highly-debated subject areas.

Controversial Issues: Euthanasia—A Guide to Resources

Kelly Myer Polacek

ABSTRACT. The purpose of this resource guide is to provide health sciences, medical, and large libraries a description of the content and

Kelly Myer Polacek, MS, MLS (kpolacek@indiana.edu) is Librarian, Main Library 011, 1320 East 10th Street, Bloomington, IN 47405.

Comments and suggestions should be sent to the Column Editors: Cindy A. Gruwell (gruwell@umn.edu) and Dawn Littleton (littleton.dawn@mayo.edu).

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features of the most popular Web sites on euthanasia. The redundancy in results of searches of the term “euthanasia” in multiple search engines indicates the high likelihood that information seekers will be directed to one or more of these sites. The eight most frequently retrieved sites are discussed here with attention paid to position (i.e., pro- or anti-euthanasia), authority, degree and quality of linkage, and uniqueness of information provided. These descriptions should help librarians direct their users to appropriate sources of information about euthanasia on the Web. doi:10.1300/J115v26n02_06 [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2007 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Euthanasia, assisted suicide, physician-assisted suicide, end-of-life, living will, death, bibliography

INTRODUCTION

In its simplest form, euthanasia is the practice of “good death” (from the Greek *eu* meaning good, and *thanos* meaning death). Today, the topic of euthanasia sparks heated debates among political, religious, and social groups. The recent events surrounding Terry Schiavo’s death resulted in a resurfacing of individual and public interests in euthanasia. Sources of information about this highly-debated, controversial, and sometimes confusing issue can themselves also be debatable, controversial, and confusing. This paper briefly describes euthanasia and reviews several popular Web sites that provide information on the topic.

Euthanasia is often used interchangeably with passive euthanasia, voluntary euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, and mercy killing, among others. In fact, each of these terms describes a particular feature or act of euthanasia. At least six distinct aspects of euthanasia have been described.^{1,2,3}

- Passive euthanasia includes any act in which a person is allowed to die. These acts include stopping treatment and medications, ceasing food, water, or other forms of life support in order to “let nature take its course.”
- Active euthanasia occurs when death results from a direct action, usually in response to a request from that person. Active euthanasia is typically performed by health care professionals (see: Physician-Assisted Suicide) or loved ones (i.e., aid in dying requested of a spouse).

- Physician-Assisted Suicide occurs when a physician provides the means for a patient to end his own life, but does not directly cause the death itself. Examples include prescriptions for sleeping pills or barbiturates. In the United States, physician-assisted suicide is legal only in the state of Oregon.
- Voluntary euthanasia is when death follows a fully-informed request from a fully-competent adult or that of an assigned proxy such as a health care power-of-attorney; also known as mercy killing when the suicide is assisted by someone other than a physician.
- Nonvoluntary euthanasia occurs when (1) a person/proxy has not explicitly requested assistance in dying; (2) the request for, or the consent to, euthanasia are not fully-informed; or, (3) a person/proxy lacks competence to make such a request. When performed, this type of euthanasia typically occurs in people who are in a persistent vegetative state who previously did not state their end-of-life wishes.
- Involuntary euthanasia occurs when euthanasia is performed against the wishes of a person/proxy. This is generally considered murder.

Some of these scenarios can be combined, which adds yet another layer to the discussion of euthanasia. For example, physician-assisted suicide, as described above earlier, is a form of voluntary euthanasia. Involuntary euthanasia can be passive or active. In general, these specifications facilitate discussion. However, some groups distinguish themselves by adding a twist to one or more terms, further confusing individuals seeking basic information on the topic. Even more challenging are sites that use these terms, some of them interchangeably, all without an obvious platform statement of pro-euthanasia, anti-euthanasia, or neutrality. In these instances, the reader is often misled, confused, or simply unable to use the material provided.

Despite the fact that it is illegal in most states, euthanasia is nevertheless practiced by health care professionals and/or support groups.⁴ Health care providers, researchers, individuals, and families in need of information will benefit from the evaluations and annotations provided in these popular Web resources.

In July 2006, searches of the term “euthanasia” were conducted using the following search engines: MSN Search, AOL Search, Yahoo! Search, Google Search, and Ask.com Search. The first ten results of each search were compared across engines; sponsored links were excluded. Of the 50 retrieved sites, less than half (21 of 50) were unique, and just eight sites represented 66% of results (see Table 1); URLs for the sites in Table 1 are available in the Appendix. Of the eight sites that comprised 66% of results, three were opposed to

TABLE 1. Unique Web Sites Retrieved from Searches of the Term "Euthanasia" in Five Popular Search Engines

Group or Site*	Frequency	Position
Euthanasia.com	6**	Anti-euthanasia
International Taskforce on Euthanasia	5	Anti-euthanasia
Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance	5	Neutral
University of San Diego Ethics Updates	4	Ethics
Wikipedia	4	Neutral
National Right to Life	3	Anti-euthanasia
Church of Euthanasia	3	Pro-euthanasia
American Veterinary Medical Association	3	Veterinary
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy	2	Ethics
Final Exit	2	Pro-euthanasia
Priests for Life	2	Anti-euthanasia
Euthanasia Research & Guidance Organization	2	Pro-euthanasia
Theology Library at Spring Hill College	1	Anti-euthanasia
Canadian Mind Products	1	Pro-euthanasia
Catholic Encyclopedia	1	Anti-euthanasia
University of Iowa Animal Research	1	Veterinary
University of Edinburgh Student Projects	1	Neutral
World Right to Die	1	Pro-euthanasia
Dignity in Dying	1	Pro-euthanasia
Not Dead Yet	1	Anti-euthanasia
Dictionary.com	1	Neutral
Total:	50	

*see Appendix for direct URLs.

**International Taskforce on Euthanasia twice in the first 10 results from Ask.com, with two different URLs leading to same site.

euthanasia, two were neutral, one was in favor of euthanasia, one discussed euthanasia in non-human animals, and one was ethical rather than positional in nature. In all, 71% of the unique sites (15 of 21) focused on the topic euthanasia in humans and provided either an obvious or interpretable position statement (see Table 2). The remaining six sites were encyclopedic, ethical, or veterinary in nature.

The redundancy of sites among the results of multiple search engines suggests the average information seeker will be directed to at least one of these sites. This likelihood merits an evaluation of the information provided at these sites. Furthermore, despite their popularity, none of these eight sites is devoted to the research and discussion of the legal aspects of this controversial topic. In

TABLE 2. Frequency and Distribution of Sites' Positional Stances

Position	Frequency	Distribution (%)
Anti-euthanasia	7	33
Pro-euthanasia	6	29
Neutral	3	14
Veterinary	3	14
Ethics	2	10

the interest of providing librarians with a useful tool for assisting their own patrons, two legal Web sites that did not appear among the results are discussed here. The sites listed here have been reviewed extensively for definitions, descriptions, and position statements. Whenever possible, the authorship, currency, bias, and degree of internal and external linking are reported, as suggested by Kirk.⁵ All of these sites are freely available to the public. The annotations and links to these sites are ideal additions to libraries' own Internet resources pages.

EUTHANASIA WEB SITES

Church of Euthanasia

<<http://ChurchOfEuthanasia.org>>

From their site: "Save the planet. Kill yourself." This site is among the top eight that represent 66% of the retrieved results and was, therefore, reviewed and discussed here. This site is not for the faint of heart. It proudly offers video footage of the World Trade Center bombings, calling the event erotic and pornographic. The obvious pro-euthanasia position is coupled with an offensive content warning. Despite its extremism and devotion to shock value, the site links to information not found on the other sites listed here. Of note are links to Voluntary Human Extinction Movement <<http://vhemt.org>>; the alt.suicide.holiday site (found at <<http://ash.spaink.net>>) with detailed methodology for killing oneself (using gas, poison, hanging, firearms, etc.); and the Central Intelligence Agency's fact book on overpopulation.

ERGO: Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization

<<http://Finalexit.org>>

Serving as the Web site of Hemlock Society founder Derek Humphrey, ERGO contains information about, and links to, sites describing its members'

efforts to change laws and policy. Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organization (ERGO) holds that voluntary euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, and self-deliverance, are all appropriate life endings depending on individual medical and ethical circumstances. Essays and reports about the practice of euthanasia make up the basis for this site, which also hosts a blog and an online bookstore. A well-known advocate of euthanasia, Humphrey's Web site provides a variety of links, although some of the information is dated.

Ethics Updates—University of San Diego
<<http://ethics.sandiego.edu/>>

From their site: "Ethics Updates is. . . dedicated to promoting the thoughtful discussion of difficult moral issues." This is exactly what this Web site does. Contained within are popular and professional resources on a variety of ethical topics. Euthanasia, which is located under the "Applied Ethics" column on the home page, includes multimedia resources, lectures, surveys, court decisions, and a mix of information-based Web sites.

Euthanasia.com
<<http://www.euthanasia.com>>

As the number one result in all the search engines used, this site prominently states: "We are committed to the fundamental belief that the intentional killing of another person is wrong. We have deep sympathy for those people who are suffering." Euthanasia.com is unique in that it considers intention the defining characteristic of euthanasia, excluding acts that are considered passive euthanasia in most other discussions. The body of the home page is a series of annotated links that are repeated in the left column, giving the appearance of different content when in fact it is redundant. Nevertheless, this site contains over 500 links, at least half of which link to articles on external sites. Unlike other euthanasia sites, the user is lead to a significant quantity of primary source articles, such as policy statements by the American Medical Association, the American Nursing Association, and the Vatican.

International Taskforce on Euthanasia
<<http://www.InternationalTaskForce.org>>

From their home page: "Addressing the issues of euthanasia, assisted suicide, advance directives, assisted suicide proposals, 'right-to-die' cases, euthanasia practices in the Netherlands, disability rights, pain control, and much,

much more. . .” This site offers a variety of information via links to external anti-euthanasia sites. Although biased, it is an excellent resource for legal information about euthanasia around the world, with particular focus on the United States and the Netherlands. The site includes links to articles from news sites such as CNN, the Washington Times, and various international newspapers. Also included are legal briefs, government publications, and unique documents such as a PDF copy of Terry Schiavo’s autopsy report. Unfortunately, the links are not well organized within the site, are often repeated, and require a great deal of “hunting and pecking” on the part of the user.

Library of Congress: Newspaper and Current Periodical Reading Room—State Information

<<http://LOC.gov/rr/news/stategov/stategov.html>>

Individuals can express their end-of-life wishes in a power-of-attorney, living will, or other formal document. The legal merit of these documents varies by state as well as by document type. State information is not listed individually here but can be accessed via the Library of Congress Web site.

National Right to Life

<<http://nrlc.org>>

From their site: “Euthanasia is the intentional killing by act or omission of a dependent human being for his or her alleged benefit.” This national organization is known primarily for its anti-abortion initiatives but is actually involved in several right-to-life issues, including infanticide, living wills, and euthanasia. The site has an obvious position statement, defines euthanasia specifically, and provides links to press releases and news articles.

Religious*Tolerance.org

<<http://www.religioustolerance.com/euthans.htm>>

This multi-faith, multi-authored site focuses on disseminating accurate religious information, particularly in regard to “hot topics.” The members of this site provide the majority of the content, with added links where they deem appropriate. The “essays” (written by the membership) within the site contain descriptions of history, religious documents, and platform statements. Euthanasia can be found as a “Hot Topic” link via the home page or by entering “euthanasia” in the Google site search box. The overt and thorough “About Us” and “Belief Statement” convey the site’s neutral and “tolerant” platform.

One significant drawback to this site is the prevalent advertising throughout its essays. Ads often appear directly in the center of the article, giving the appearance that the article has ended when it actually continues beyond the advertisement. Nevertheless, the distractions are worth tolerating as this site provides some of the most accessible, understandable, and neutral information available.

THOMAS: Legislative Information from the Library of Congress
<<http://Thomas.LOC.gov>>

Legislative documents such as The Assisted Suicide Funding Restriction Act of 1997 and the Pain Relief Promotion Act of 1999 are freely available online in full text. For each bill, a summary, congressional references, and a current status are available. For best results, search all available sessions of Congress using an ordered proximity search #1(assisted suicide).

Wikipedia
<<http://www.wikipedia.com>>

Recent studies have shown the accuracy of online encyclopedias to be comparable to their print counterparts,⁶ thus giving merit to these ubiquitous information sources.⁷ The euthanasia article at Wikipedia can be found by entering "euthanasia" in the search box on its home page. The presenting table of contents allows the reader easy navigation among definitions, national and international issues, ethics, and other topics. The 4,000+ word article contains a scant 13 references, of which only four are external. Nevertheless, it boasts more than 25 internal euthanasia-related links (including those to definitions, famous people, and famous cases) as well as a unique listing of 23 external sites categorized as pro-euthanasia, anti-euthanasia, or neutral.

CONCLUSION

Euthanasia is a dynamic and controversial topic. As our population ages and health care improves, the question of when and how we die is becoming increasingly common. As evidenced by the sites described earlier, information available about euthanasia on the Web is diverse in its authority, currency, and ethical position. This resource guide should help librarians and their patrons locate useful, useable information on the Web, as well as begin to develop a broad understanding of the difficult topic of euthanasia.

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APPENDIX

Specific URLs Retrieved from Searches of the Term "Euthanasia" in Five Popular Search Engines

Frequency = number of times site appeared among 50 possible results. Searches conducted July 19, 2006.

Group or Site	Frequency	URL and Search Engine***
Euthanasia.com	6	http://www.euthanasia.com/ (k, g, a, m, y) http://www.euthanasia.com/definitions.html (y)
International Taskforce on Euthanasia	5	http://www.internationaltaskforce.org/ (k, g, a) http://www.iaetf.org/ (k) http://www.internationaltaskforce.org/holland.htm (m)
Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance	5	http://www.religioustolerance.org/euthanas.htm (k, g, a, m, y)

APPENDIX (continued)

Group or Site	Frequency	URL and Search Engine***
University of San Diego Ethics Updates	4	ethics.acusd.edu/euthanasia.html**** (k, g, a, y)
Wikipedia	4	http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euthanasia (g, a, m, y)
National Right to Life	3	http://www.nrlc.org/euthanasia/ (g, a, m)
Church of Euthanasia	3	http://www.churchofeuthanasia.org/ (g, a, m)
American Veterinary Medical Association	3	www.avma.org/resources/euthanasia.pdf (g, a) http://www.avma.org/careforanimals/animatedjourneys/goodbyefriend/goodbye.asp (m)
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy	2	http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/euthanasia-voluntary/ (g, a)
Final Exit	2	http://www.finalexit.org/ (k, m)
Priests for Life	2	http://www.priestsforlife.org/euthanasia/index.htm (m) http://www.priestsforlife.org/euthanasia/euthanasia.html (y)
Euthanasia Research & Guidance Organization	2	http://www.efn.org/~ergo/ (g, a)
Theology Library at Spring Hill College	1	http://www.shc.edu/theolibrary/euthan.htm (y)
Canadian Mind Products	1	http://mindprod.com/humanrights/euthanasia.html (y)
Catholic Encyclopedia	1	http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05630a.htm (y)
University of Iowa Animal Research	1	http://research.uiowa.edu/animal/?get=euthanasia (y)
University of Edinburgh Student Projects	1	http://www.portfolio.mvm.ed.ac.uk/studentwebs/session3/55/efor4.htm (k)
World Right to Die	1	http://www.worldrtd.net/ (k)
Dignity in Dying	1	http://www.dignityindying.org.uk/ (k)
Not Dead Yet	1	http://www.notdeadyet.org/ (k)
Dictionary.com	1	http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=euthanasia (m)

***Search engines: (k) = Ask.com; (g) = Google; (a) = AOL; (m) = MSN; (y) = Yahoo!

****Has since changed to: <http://ethics.acusd.edu/Applied/Euthanasia/index.asp>

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