

# “WHY, THAT’S KILLING!”

## TELLING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KILLING AND CARING.



*Third of an  
8 Part Series*

The distinction between killing and caring often provokes the greatest practical concern for Catholics when medical decisions need to be made.

- “By giving this pain medication to Aunt Mae, and seeing her breathing slow down, are we killing her?”
- “By removing this treatment, and letting Grandpa die, am I killing him?”

One can approach these kinds of questions by following certain rules of thumb.

### *The basics: Killing aims for death*

A medical decision that results in death coming sooner rather than later might raise one’s moral antennae. But don’t jump to conclusions. The evil of “killing” involves far more than a showing that someone’s life, with or without treatment, lasted less than it could have.

At stake is the dignity of human life and our role as stewards. We are called to care for life, not attack it.

Some methods of shortening life are obviously wrong. Deciding to destroy one’s own or another’s life by shooting, for example, involves an attack on life.

This type of decision has death as its aim, either as an end in itself, or as a means to achieving some other end, such as to escape from suffering. An attack against life uses methods calculated to make life of any duration impossible.

### *Pain medication: Look at the calculations*

What about pain relief for Aunt Mae? Here, death is not the aim, either as an end or as a means. How do we know? The key practical distinction lies in the calculations involved. A good approach to pain relief will calculate the least amount of medicine necessary to relieve pain to minimize the risk of shortening life. Jack Kevorkian, however, will calculate the largest dosage of medicine necessary to maximize the certainty of death.

Sometimes, good pain relief calls for large doses of medicine but because of the chemistry involved no side effects will occur. When delivered properly, large dosages may even increase the chances for longer life by helping Aunt Mae to relax. In fact, pain relief risks hastened death in only one percent of the cases.

But is it wrong to take even medicine carefully calculated to stop pain if we

foresee that death still might occur sooner as a result? No. Our responsibility before God only requires us to act reasonably. We do not have to eliminate all risk. We may assume certain risks, even the risk of death, for the reasonable purpose of treating the pain. The calculations involved will show that we are not aiming for death.

*Nontreatment: Because life is a burden?*

What about Grandpa's treatment? We have an affirmative duty to provide care to sustain life, but that duty is not absolute. The treatment at issue may impose burdens or risks that Grandpa finds unacceptable. Such a refusal, in and of itself, is not "killing".

Why? Refusing to extend life with aggressive treatment beyond the time of natural death is not an attack on life. Life is not destroyed when treatment is withheld, but only left shortened to its natural duration. Unless the nontreatment decision was the result of neglect or a rejection of life itself, it is not wrongful.

- Neglect happens when we abandon our duty to care, and without good reason fail to provide for our own or others' needs. Declining treatment because it is too burdensome, risky, ineffective, or disproportionate to the expected outcome is not neglect. Our duty to care in such circumstances shifts from avoiding death to providing comfort and hope as death approaches.

- If one views life as a "meaningless burden" lacking suitable "quality", then red flags should fly. Even though human life is not an absolute good, it is still always a good. Perishable, but always cherishable, our lives remain God's gift and honored creation. There is a big difference between an attitude that despises dependency and wants death, and the Christian belief that accepts natural death while treasuring life.

***For more information about these issues, contact the Massachusetts Catholic Conference by calling 1-617-367-6060, or by going online to [www.macathconf.org](http://www.macathconf.org).***

MASSACHUSETTS CATHOLIC CONFERENCE  
West End Place, 150 Staniford Street, First Floor  
Boston, MA 02114-2511  
617-367-6060 (ph) 617-367-2767 (fx)  
[www.macathconf.org](http://www.macathconf.org)



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