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From Euthanasia to Assisted Suicide

Session L2

Reading: Ezekiel J. Emanuel, "The History of Euthanasia Debates in the United States and Britain," *Annals of Internal Medicine* 121 (1994): 793-802.

"Euthanasia—Degenerated Sympathy," *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* 154 (11 March 1906): 330-331.

Timothy Quill, "Death and Dignity: A Case of Individualized Decision Making," *New England Journal of Medicine* 324 (1991): 691-694.

Emanuel, "History of Euthanasia Debates": Emanuel, a physician, also has a Ph.D. in political philosophy from Harvard. When he wrote this article, he was an oncologist at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute in Boston. He then became chairman of Clinical Bioethics at the National Institutes of Health. He is now working in the White House (his brother is President Obama's chief of staff). In this article he traces the history of debates about euthanasia in the US and Britain. Focus on two things. First, he provides a pretty clear narrative of the comings and goings of the debates, arguing that the substance of the debates has not changed over the past one hundred years. Second, towards the end he makes specific arguments about the specific social and economic contexts in which euthanasia is popular, and the specific contexts in which it is not. Are you convinced by his arguments? Can euthanasia really only thrive at a time when social Darwinism is accepted?

"Euthanasia -- Degenerate Sympathy": This editorial, by an anonymous author, appeared in the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (the predecessor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*) in 1906, amidst the debates about euthanasia triggered by Charles Eliot Norton and the Ohio legislation, as described by Emanuel. Why is the author so upset? How does he (I assume it's a male author) want the profession to respond? Does he make a convincing case? Do you think that Emanuel is right that this article could be published today and still sound relevant?

Quill, "Death and Dignity": Trained in medicine, geriatrics, and psychiatry, Quill is currently director of palliative care at University of Rochester Medical Center, and probably the most prominent advocate in the US of the right to die. This fame (and infamy in some circles) stems from this article, about his role in the death of a patient suffering from leukemia. The article was a bombshell when it was published in 1991, one of the first times a physician admitted in public to this kind of assisted suicide. Many people saw him as a hero for his courage to speak honestly about a crucial issue. Others felt he should be prosecuted, or at least lose his medical license. He continues to write extensively about these issues. I find this article to be incredibly moving. Other people are horrified by it. What would you have done in his situation? Was his statement to the Medical Examiner truthful? Reassess Emanuel's arguments: was Quill's act motivated by social Darwinism, economic recession, and threat to physician authority, or is there something that Emanuel is missing?