

Arguments against the decision

- Sanctity of life
- Personhood
- Slippery slope

Moral Decisions - The Value of Life

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

This video resource discusses the moral, ethical and emotional issues of Euthanasia using well known case studies to prompt discussion and debate.

Duration of resource: 14 Minutes

Year of Production: 2014

Stock code: RLC14003000

Tony Bland (Hillsborough disaster) was left in a permanent vegetative state and his parents wanted him to be allowed to die but this involved stopping feeding him.

Diane Petty (a lady with advanced motor neurone disease) wanted her husband to be allowed to help her die without facing criminal prosecution.

This informative resource discusses and opens debates on the issues of moral decisions around a right to life.

Moral Decisions - The Value of Life

Short Program 1 – A Right to Die

Activity 1 - Diane Pretty Case - Answer the following questions:

1. Can you briefly describe Diane Pretty's condition?

2. Why did Diane Pretty go to Court? What did she want the Court to do?

3. What did the British courts decide in her case and why?

4. Why is the Human Rights Act relevant here?

Moral Decisions - The Value of Life

Short Program 2 – End of Life

Activity 1 – Tony Bland Case - Answer the following questions:

1. Tony Bland was in a persistent vegetative state. Can you explain what this means?

2. In the video clip the presenter says, “Turning off a life support machine when a patient has no prospect of recovery is quite common, but the issue in the Tony Bland case was different and much more controversial.”

What was different and controversial about the Tony Bland case that made it different from previous cases?

3. What was House of Lord’s the decision in the Bland case?

4. How was this decision justified?

5. What have been some of the consequences in the Bland decision?

Moral Decisions - The Value of Life

Short Program 1 – A Right to Die

Activity 1 – Answers

1. Can you briefly describe Diane Pretty's condition?
Diane Pretty, a British woman from Luton, developed motor neurone disease, a progressive neuro-degenerative disease of the nervous system where the muscles weaken and collapse causing the person to lose the ability to move, talk, swallow and finally even to breath.
2. Why did Diane Pretty go to Court? What did she want the Court to do?
In Britain (and most countries) stands, while it is not illegal to try to kill yourself, assisted suicide (helping someone else to end their life) is illegal. Diane Pretty was frightened of choking to death and, as she was physically unable to end her own life, she wanted an assurance from the Court that her husband would not be to be prosecuted if he helped her to die.
3. What did the British courts decide in her case and why?
The High Court turned her request down. They said that as helping another to die is against the law of the land (Suicide Act 1961: Section 2) they were not in a position to give her the assurance she wanted. This decision was upheld by the House of Lords that also expressed concern that there would be a clear risk of abuse if the prohibition on assisted suicide was relaxed.
4. Why is the Human Rights Act relevant here?
Diane Pretty's legal team argued that not allowing Diane Pretty to die meant she was being subjected to inhuman and degrading treatment which is a violation of her human rights. Further, she was suffering discrimination, because her physical condition denied her the right to end her own life.
5. What did the European Court of Human Rights decide?
The European Court upheld the decision of the British courts on the grounds that a law prohibiting assisted suicide was necessary to protect others and that this did not amount to degrading and inhumane treatment.

Activity 2 - Assisted Suicide – Suggested student responses

Focussing on the ethical arguments and drawing on the video clip, gather into three groups. Each group is to make a case for debate by choosing one of the following arguments:

- Group 1** - prepare a short case in favour of allowing assisted suicide.
- Group 2** - make an ethical case against allowing assisted suicide.
- Group 3** - are to decide which case they found more convincing and why.

The case for assisted suicide:

There are a number of arguments which have been used to support this case:

- **Autonomy:** people have a right to control the end of their own life
- **As suicide is not illegal,** helping someone with a terminal illness to die should not be illegal either.
- **Keeping someone alive who wants to die, but is unable to kill themselves,** is a violation of their human rights.
- **As some doctors secretly end the lives of people who want die,** this should be out in the open so it can be properly regulated as it is in Holland, for example.

Moral Decisions - The Value of Life

The case against assisted suicide:

Again, there are a number of arguments here, most of which are aimed at rebutting the ethical principles underlying the case for assisted suicide:

- Assisted suicide is not just about the autonomy of the patient. As it necessarily involves someone else, it also involves the autonomy of the other which may be compromised. For example, doctors or relatives may feel pressurised into helping someone to die.
- Therefore, suicide and assisted suicide are not the same ethically. The latter is not just about the individual.
- Assisted suicide compromises the notion of the sanctity of life.
- Laws against assisted suicide are necessary to protect others. For example, some people could be pressurised into requesting to die because they are using up limited health resources or using up money that could be left to relatives.
- There is an alternative to assisted suicide in many cases. As Dr Knight explains in the video clip, once a Dr has explained the kind of treatment available, many patients withdraw their request to die.

Short Program 2 – End of Life

Activity 1 – Answers

1. Tony Bland was in a persistent vegetative state. Can you explain what this means?
A state of being awake but unconscious that lasts for more than a few weeks.
2. In the video clip the presenter says, “Turning off a life support machine when a patient has no prospect of recovery is quite common, but the issue in the Tony Bland case was different and much more controversial.”
3. What was different and controversial about the Tony Bland case that made it different from previous cases?
What was different about the Bland case was that Tony could breathe and digest food normally, and the hospital was asking for permission to end feeding and hydrating him. So the key issue was whether or not feeding and hydrating could be considered as treatment.
4. What was House of Lord’s the decision in the Bland case?
The House of Lords decided, by a majority, that feeding and hydrating could be considered as treatment and therefore the hospital could legally withdraw food and water from Tony Bland. He was the first person in legal history to die through the withdrawal of food and water
5. How was this decision justified?
A number of arguments can be put forward, but three key ones are:
 - As Tony had no conscious awareness he had no quality of life and no interest in being kept alive
 - Tony was no longer a person in the sense normally understood by the term
 - The wishes of Tony Bland’s parents who wanted to be allowed to bury their son and grieve for him
6. What have been some of the consequences in the Bland decision?
As withdrawal of food and fluid is now considered as treatment, a body of medical opinion has developed applying this to a wider range of cases, such as patients with severe strokes and dementia.

Moral Decisions - The Value of Life

Activity 2 – Answers

10 minutes into the second short program (End of Life), a 'Pause for discussion' bar will flash on the bottom left of the screen. Gather into small groups to identify and explain some of the main ethical arguments against the decision to let Tony Bland die.

There are a number of arguments that can be put forward, some of which are touched on in the video.

- **The sanctity of life argument: this is the idea that life is sacred and this principle should not be violated, this is an idea associated with, but not confined to, those with religious convictions.**
- **The intrinsic nature of personhood: a key argument in the Bland case was that as Tony had no conscious awareness, he was not 'really' a person. However, that can be challenged. A person should not be seen simply in terms of what they can do, think and feel, but rather should be seen in terms of who they are. From this perspective, Tony Bland was still a person in spite of his lack of conscious awareness.**
- **The 'slippery slope' argument: the idea here is that introducing a change aimed in good faith at affecting a small number of people can lead to a chain of events that gets out of control. As Dr Knight puts it in the video clip, 'If you end one person's life because you think it's not worth living, it's easier, maybe to end someone else's life, and gradually you start thinking who is worthy**