

End of life: the humanist view

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A central tenet of humanist thought is that this world and this life are the only ones we have, and that, in the absence of an after-life and a soul, death brings a natural end to our existence. Broadly defined, a humanist is a morally concerned person who is not religious. However, individual humanist beliefs vary immensely—from atheists, who regard God as a human creation, to agnostics who might merely assert that although they can neither prove nor disprove God's existence, it is of no practical concern to them. But all humanists will tend to share a scepticism toward, and a rejection of, traditional religion and religious ritual, and a positive commitment to living a morally responsible life.

In view of this practical emphasis on the world, the community, and the individual, rather than a transcendental emphasis on God and the after-life of the soul, how can those in the medical profession best meet the needs of humanists as they approach death? In answering this question, we will begin with a brief introduction to humanism and its main tenets, going on to consider what differentiates the humanist approach to death from the religious one. We will explain the main criteria for what might constitute a good death for humanists and how medical staff can help them achieve this end.

The key issues are: the fundamental requirement to accord the needs and beliefs of humanists the same respect given to religious believers; the need to recognise that humanists vary in their attitude towards their own death and might or might not want to be informed of the full facts of their case, despite a genuine respect for truth and honesty in all matters; and the need for autonomy and control over the means of death and the treatment of their body after death. We also will discuss some of the difficulties incurred when the dying person's family neither respects nor shares his or her beliefs. We will include recommendations about how the needs of humanists can best be accommodated in the hospital.

Humanism

Some might argue that without a belief in God, and a set of God-given moral rules, there is no requirement for a person to embrace any moral code whatsoever. Although this view describes some atheists, it is not a definition of humanism, which consists not merely in the denial of the existence of God, but in a positive creed that asserts, first, that the moral life is desirable in itself, and second, that because there is no supernatural source of moral values, it is up to people to identify these principles and abide by them.

Historically, humanism is a continuation of the western European tradition of non-religious thought that can be traced back some 2500 years to the

philosophy of the ancient Greeks. One of humanism's moral roots can be found in the enlightenment tradition of liberal values that is also enshrined in the United Nation's *Universal declaration of human rights*; the belief that all people are equal and should be free to hold and express their beliefs as long as they do not harm others.

Because humanists (panel 1) believe that morality is independent of religious faith, and that humans cannot rely on anyone or anything other than themselves to solve human problems, humanists have often been active social reformers. The early ethical societies of the Victorian era did much social and educational work in city slums, and 20th-century humanists were instrumental in opening up adoption services to non-religious people, at a time when these services were administered by the church, and unless you were a practising Christian you could not adopt a child. Today, the British Humanist Association meets the need to mark the major life transitions of birth, marriage, and death, by training and accrediting humanist officiants to conduct non-religious ceremonies. It is a typical feature of humanists that they prefer to take ownership of these occasions by scripting the ceremony themselves, selecting music, poetry, or prose that has a special significance for them and that focuses on the people concerned rather than on a transcendental world.

For professionals in medical and palliative care, humanists' emphasis on individualism can make meeting the needs of humanists difficult. The rituals and beliefs of many organised religions are quite well prescribed; however, humanism, with its tradition in rationalism and free thought, leaves a great deal to the individual. Although for hospital staff to discern the needs of humanists is difficult, it can be just as difficult for humanists to decide their own needs in the absence of a set of prescriptive rules governing the way they should approach death, and the disposal of the body, or of rituals that should be performed.

Respecting the positively non-religious

The first step towards according humanists the same respect accorded to religious believers is a simple one—keep hospital and hospice environments free of religious symbols and texts, which can be made available on

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Panel 1: Some 20th-century humanists

Karl Popper, A J Ayer, G E Moore, Antony Flew, E M Forster, Bertrand Russell, Claire Rayner, John Fowles, Jonathan Miller, David Hare, Arthur Miller, Harold Pinter, Vanessa Redgrave, Peter Ustinov, Conor Cruise O'Brien, Richard Dawkins, Lewis Wolpert, Francis Crick, John Sulston, Anthony Epstein, David Weatherall, Richard Doll, James Gowans, Kenneth Stuart, and Roy Calne.

request to those who want them. This basic consideration not only avoids causing offence to humanists, but also to those of other faith groups as well.

We should remember that not all non-religious people are humanists—many people reject religion without embracing the positive moral position of humanism. They might, for example, ascribe to new age spiritualism, eastern religion, a belief in reincarnation, or just a vague belief that there is something more. However, these people are not humanists, because a prerequisite of being a humanist is that the supernatural has been rejected.

Identification of humanists can be difficult because, unlike with organised religions, it is possible to be a humanist without knowing that humanism is the best description of one's beliefs. A humanist is any atheist or agnostic who believes in the possibility of a meaningful and moral life.

Humanists can be identified at the point of entry into hospital care. Pre-admission forms include a space for people to self-identify according to religious belief; however, these forms generally do not include an option for non-religious beliefs. Some members of the British Humanist Association have reported that when filling out these forms they have informed hospital staff that they are atheists or humanists, and the space has been filled with the word “none” or has been struck through, or they have been marked as “C of E”, an abbreviation for Church of England, a term that is often used as a default category for those who profess no particular religious affiliation. An adapted form would allow humanists to identify themselves on point of entry while also alerting staff.

Humanists are too often characterised as hardened atheists and rationalists, and it might be imagined that all humanists are hard-nosed stoics, determined to face-down death with steely determination. But this assumption should not be made. Certainly, some humanists do approach death in just this way, subscribing to the view that there is nothing to fear about being dead since once we are dead we will simply not be there—so nothing good or bad can happen to us. But as Woody Allen said, “It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens”. Dying can be as fearful for humanists as for anyone else, and although they accept the inevitability of death, that does not mean they are going to be happy when it comes, especially if it comes prematurely.

Similarly, although humanists reject traditional, religious, and confessional forms of counselling, they might want to talk about their coming death with a neutral third party. As death approaches, people of all beliefs often feel the need to unburden themselves of past secrets or achieve some form of closure in unresolved difficulties. Providing a secular counselling service can meet this need, and in some parts of the UK,

humanist officiants, in addition to conducting weddings, funerals, and baby-naming ceremonies, have extended their work into areas such as palliative counselling and secular chaplaincy. If counsellors are used, their approach should be entirely secular.

Understandably, onlookers want to offer some sort of consolation in the face of death, and religion has for many years offered just that; however, doing nothing is sometimes preferable. Faced with a person who has perhaps suffered a terrible and painful lifelong illness, or who is dying at a young age and before there are any real achievements to look back on, what consolation can possibly be offered? Humanists do not expect easy answers here, and would be unlikely to provide any, other than the fact that their misery is soon to end. Humanists would generally prefer hospital staff to say and do nothing, rather than attempt to fill what appears to be a void with religion.

For those charged with the care of the dying, and for family and friends, the desire to fill this void can be hard to resist. But if this means providing something that is in conflict with the patient's belief system, this desire must be resisted. Sometimes hospital staff can do nothing except provide the best medical care possible and an environment in which patients can come to terms with their death themselves.

Can religion really do any harm?

If humanists do not believe in the truth of religion, can they be harmed by religious rituals they are unaware of? For example, if a priest gives last rites over a humanist who has slipped into terminal unconsciousness, what harm can possibly be done? The claim here is that humanists cannot be harmed by something they don't believe in the power of, and have no awareness of. But it does not follow that because humanists believe death is the end, they also have no interest in, or claim on, what happens after their death. To draw a comparison, I do you an injustice if I slander you behind your back, even if you never find out about it, and I can equally do you an injustice if I slander you after your death. And whether or not a humanist can be wronged after death, a person's wishes still need to be respected after death. Humanists are committed to specific values: a resistance to the dominance of traditional religious forms of ceremony and to the assumption that meaning, purpose, and ethics can be supplied only by religion. Thus for a humanist to consent to any form of religious ceremony is to assert exactly that which humanists oppose, and would constitute a gross disregard for their views. In the wider context of society as a whole, part of the humanist project is to gain recognition that people can live happy, full, and moral lives without recourse to religious dogma and rituals. To do anything to a dead or dying humanist that would undermine this project or fail to show the project proper respect would therefore be inappropriate.

These are difficult issues for medical staff to address, and staff can and do come under pressure from family—from a parent, for example, who has a strong desire (even a psychological need) for last rites to be given, even though the patient explicitly rejected these rituals. Faced with an anguished parent and an unconscious patient, to grant the parent's wish might seem harmless. However, to do so would be to behave with gross inconsistency. After all, would it not be unimaginable to allow a non-Christian death ritual to be done with a patient who was a committed Christian but whose parents were of another faith, or vice-versa? So it is for the humanist. Similarly, what harm might there be in allowing a priest to drop by on his rounds for a chat—after all, he can always be sent away? But being visited by a priest will not be part of the script humanists are trying to write for themselves as they face their last days. Such a visit can cause both harm and offence to humanists, who might or might not be able to express how offended they would be to staff if, at the point of death, they are faced with someone offering the consolations of religion and a life after death. Moreover, it would be a signal failure to respect the humanist's right to confront death without these props.

Again, this is not merely a thought experiment. Hospital staff have been known to allow priests to approach dying humanists, just to check they do not want to change their mind and embrace the faith before it is too late. For humanists who actively reject religion such actions cause much offence. Indeed, one humanist officiant categorically stated, when asked how he would want to be treated on his death-bed, "Make sure no religious twit stops by to talk". Clearly, allowing a priest to visit this humanist's bedside would not only cause offence but also anger. However, each humanist is different and some might be happy to talk to a chaplain in some circumstances.

Personal autonomy has an important role for humanists. Humanists typically value the way in which they can, and must, become the authors of their own lives. They will strongly resist being caught up in standard procedures or those that assume a theistic view of the world. The need to retain control or authorship of their lives right until the end is typical, and is shown by the large number of members of the British Humanist Association who are also members of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. Humanists want to take responsibility for their deaths just as much as their lives, and their support for euthanasia shows that they are more likely than others to want to have the final say in what treatment they are given and the chance to refuse treatment that merely postpones death a little longer.

Panel 2: Recommended Reading

- Baggini J. *Atheism: a very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Dunn M. *The good death guide*. Oxford: Pathways, 2000.
- Forster EM. *What I believe* (essay). London: Hogarth Press, 1939.
- Herrick J. *Humanism: an introduction*. London: Rationalist Press Association, 2003.
- Herrick J, Pearce J, eds. *Seasons of life: prose and poetry for secular ceremonies and private reflection*. London: Rationalist Press Association, 2000.
- The Humanist Philosophers Group. *What is humanism?* London: British Humanist Association, 2002.
- Knight M, ed. *Humanist anthology*. London: Rationalist Press Association, 1995.
- Mountain C. *Out of the ordinary: ceremonies where the circumstances are unusual or tragic*. London: British Humanist Association, 2000.
- Nagel T. *Mortal questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Nagel T. *What does it all mean?* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987.
- Robinson R. *An atheist's values*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1964.
- Russell B. *Why I am not a Christian*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957.
- Walter N. *Humanism: what's in the word*. London: Rationalist Press Association, 1997.
- Wynne WJ. *Funerals without God*. London: British Humanist Association, 1998.

Humanism encourages open discussion of death and is opposed to pretending it does not happen. But individual humanists approaching death have different needs, and many might prefer not to know everything. Fear and sensitivity are not alien to the humanist psyche.

Conclusion

There can be a tendency to assume, perhaps because of the absence of dogma and rules, that humanists have fewer needs than religious believers. If people say they are Sikh, for example, their needs are well known and documented and care is taken to meet these needs. But if the person is a humanist, the assumption might be that there are no specific needs to be met, other than the minimum and negative need not to offer religious support. We have attempted to demonstrate that humanists' needs are not fewer than, just different from, those of religious believers. We argue that ignoring these needs is a form of discrimination because it fails to take the belief system of the humanist as seriously as that of the religious believer.

The needs of the humanist must, necessarily, be varied, because every humanist is an individual forging his or her own meaning in the world. We cannot therefore offer specific prescriptions for how all humanists should be treated as they approach death. But what remains true is that we should respect the humanist belief—that this life is all there is and that death is the end, and that at the same time life is of value. To do this we have to keep religion out of the hospital environment and allow patients to approach death on their own terms. For further reading see panel 2.