Euthanasia and abortion
Margaret J Sparrow

Grant Gillett in his Report on Euthanasia for the New Zealand Medical Association suggests that it is a permissive law change which has seen abortion change from being a stigmatised, backroom activity to being an acceptable alternative for a woman with an unwanted pregnancy, and uses this example to warn of the risks that permissive legislation may bring to societal moral standards. Some may refer to this as the slippery slope argument although Gillett does not go as far as this, stating it is unclear whether such slopes exist. There are many other factors which have contributed to the change in attitude to abortion and it is unhelpful in this context to link the 1977 abortion legislation to any pending legislation on euthanasia. Since a peak of 20.8 abortions per 1,000 women aged 15–44 years in 2003, the general abortion rate has gradually and significantly declined to 13.5 in 2016 without any change in the law.¹

Abortion and euthanasia share some superficial similarities. Both involve loss of life and have been practised outside clinical contexts for aeons but are increasingly medicalised partly for reasons of safety. Both involve the person most concerned making decisions for themselves that are forbidden by some religions. Compassion is a common feature of both. However there are substantive differences:

• Most obviously they occur at opposite ends of the life span, raising different issues.
• Abortion is more time sensitive; the earlier it happens, the safer it is for the woman.
• Abortion is now a common gynaecological procedure affecting one in four women in OECD countries. Euthanasia, where permissible, is uncommon.
• Euthanasia is a possibility for anyone on the gender spectrum. Abortion is a woman’s issue and has historically been subject to all the oppressions and degradations associated with being a woman in a patriarchal society hostile to women’s autonomy.
• To some, euthanasia is possibly more ethical than abortion, because the patient is competent and actually makes the request themselves whereas the life that is lost in abortion is decided by another.

With legislation now in the form of David Seymour’s End of Life Choice Bill currently before Parliament may the arguments for legislation be treated on their merits and not be confused by reference to abortion.

Competing interests:
Nil.

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