

THE CHILD KILLERS

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Jutte van den Werff Ten Bosch has already had *the* talk with her 10-year-old son. Several times, in fact. No, not the sex talk. The *euthanasia* talk.

"Even if he said, 'I want to die', I'd support him," she explained. "I didn't put my children in the world for *me*. It's their life and their death. The best parents are the ones who let their children go."

Professor van den Werff Ten Bosch's dinner-table conversations with her son and her three other children are far from hypothetical: They live in Belgium, where a law allowing child euthanasia is on track to be passed early next year.

The law, which follows a 2002 law making euthanasia legal for consenting adults, will allow terminally children of any age to request that their lives be terminated.

"Children with terminal diseases like cancer mature much faster than other children. They think a lot about their life and death and how they'd like their death to be. And sometimes they're more courageous than their parents," said van den Werff Ten Bosch, a pediatric oncologist who works at Brussels University Hospital.

The child euthanasia bill (...) stipulates that doctors can suggest to terminally ill minors that they should be euthanized.

After the child decides in favor of death, the parents have to consent, though the law makes no provision for what will happen if the parents disagree. Euthanasia is usually performed by a doctor, who gives the patient an overdose of muscle relaxants or sedatives. This causes a coma followed by death.

Since Belgium passed its adult euthanasia law, the number of patients who have asked to be killed has grown to over 1,400 per year.

But the laws have raised a number of ethical, moral, and legal dilemmas. Such as, is it right for a parent to propose the legal killing of their child in any circumstances? And, as children don't have the same reasoning skills as adults, are they equipped to make a terminal decision about their lives that will also deeply affect the lives of others?

Like most animals, humans have an innate instinct to protect their young. As the 20th century German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: "The test of the morality of a society is what it does for its children."

Have the Belgians gone completely mad in allowing doctors to help children die? Or are they, by contrast, on track to become Earth's most compassionate society because they'll end children's suffering?

The issue has divided Belgians in a radically new way: not along political lines but according to personal morality. Marie, 28, an occupational therapist, said she thinks the adult euthanasia law works well, so she sees no problem in extending it to children. According to a poll by *LaLibre* newspaper, 74 percent of Belgians are in favor the law.

Yet faith groups from the Roman Catholic Church to Muslims and Jews remain firmly opposed, as do many doctors and nurses.

"If that's not enough, a palliative sedation can induce the child into a deep sleep, and it won't suffer any more. The patient will then usually die within several days and during this period the family can

stay with the child and start the mourning," he said.

Proponents of the law, however, consider such arguments outdated. Peter Deconinck, professor at the Free University of Brussels, said it's high time to break the taboo surrounding child euthanasia.

"It's our duty. Children today are not like they were 50 years ago. They have mature minds," he said.

"It's a doctor's duty to speak to such a child in a plain manner, perhaps not saying everything the first time, but little by little."

Besides, say supporters of the bill, child euthanasia is already happening in Belgium. "In reality, pediatricians are compelled by compassion to end the lives of quite a few children with the agreement of their parents," said Bernheim, professor at the Free University of Brussels. "They've had to do it clandestinely, with the risk of being charged by prosecutors," he said. "Now they'll be able to do it the legal way."

Before they give the full weight of the law to child euthanasia, Belgian politicians will have to address other implications: for example, how to handle the likely rise of euthanasia tourism.

The law requires statements by psychologists and doctors confirming the child's ability to make the decision. The child's doctors must also inform him about medical options that may ease his suffering and maintain a dialogue about his preferences.

Carine Brochier of the European Institute of Bioethics in Brussels warned that the child euthanasia law would open an ethically dangerous door. "What's next? Euthanasia for people with dementia? Then for handicapped people?" she said.

Indeed, deciding who qualifies for life comes close to playing God, and that power has been taken to extremes before. In the Third Reich, German doctors killed more than 10,000 handicapped or incurably ill children. Unlike Belgium's children, the German children were never asked whether they wanted to die. But if the law were to pass in Belgium, doctors would be allowed to suggest to children that they agree to be killed.

Passing the new law permitting children to agree to the end of their life will reflect on Belgian society, its morals and duties. "What does child euthanasia mean for our life together in Belgium?" asked Brochier. "The answer to terminally ill children's suffering is more solidarity, and that includes more financial support for palliative care."

The third part of this new death trinity, complementing the doctors and the child, are the parents.

According to van der Werff Ten Bosch, most parents don't want their child to suffer, and "if the child says, 'I really want to die,' 90 percent of parents will let him."

Still, the choice between consenting to one's child's death wish and prolonging his painful life presents parents with an agonizing spectrum of emotions. Some doctors argue that it places parents in such an excruciating position that it would be more compassionate to leave them out of the decision altogether.

A majority vote on a child's life or death? Belgium is indeed entering a chilling new world.