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Death and euthanasia in Jewish law

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PREFACE

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INTRODUCTION

Problems associated with death and dying have always bothered us, but they have assumed a somewhat different form in recent years. There are a number of reasons for this. The enormous advances of medical science in the last century has led to increased expectations. The patient and the family feel that there is something else that can be done, and that medical technology which is emerging so rapidly must be used to provide answers which will ease the individual discomforts of death.

PREFACE

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along with an attitude on the part of some medical practitioners who believed that all decisions were now in their hands has led to a reexamination of medical ethics particularly at critical junctures when death threatened. Rather than permitting the physician to make decisions alone, the patients and their families have wanted to be included in the process. They have, of course, sought advice from many sources including the religious community as they wished to do what was best for the patient and what was right and ethical.

An additional set of problems has been raised by the overindulgent use of medical technology when it no longer could benefit the patient. In some instances this has been done at the request of the patients or their families. In others, it has simply occurred because it was available and has become standard procedure irrespective of the condition or potential for life in the patient. Added to all of this has been the fear of litigation by the medical profession, something which has become a major factor in the last years.

These issues and others have raised questions which Judaism must answer. The traditional responses have been only partially helpful because few individuals have reviewed them in the light of the new medical technology and/or changed attitudes. Furthermore, the number of discussions about these matters in the past remains extremely limited.