Abstract

John Hardwig created a major stir in the bioethics and health care ethics communities when he published his provocative article “Is There a Duty to Die?” In response to this article, Rosemarie Tong argues that individuals have no duty—either to family members, other loved ones, or society—to die.

First, Tong summarizes Hardwig’s arguments on behalf of a duty to die, particularly his view of this duty as a moral obligation or responsibility as opposed to a legal duty. Second, she outlines five points in the case against a duty to die:

1. It seems inappropriate to hinge the duty to die on whether or not a person is fortunate enough to have a family, loved ones, or another type of web of human relationships.
2. Given our present society, in which health care expenses and managed care regulations influence the giving of less medical treatment instead of the giving of all possible treatments, considerations of a duty to die are inappropriate until standards are set for managed care treatment, for example.
3. A duty to die will not be perceived equally by the sexes and therefore may be discriminatory toward women who may feel pressured to accept a duty to die, because men are typically socialized to think of their individual rights and women are typically socialized to think of their communal responsibilities.
4. Instead of a “duty” to die, the concept might be better understood as the “option” to die, a choice that people are free to make.
5. Instead of using the language of duty and obligation, the concept should be described in the language of caring and choice.

Finally, Tong concludes that in our present individualistic and rights-oriented society, it is not safe to posit a duty to die. Until all members of society are considered on equal terms, the duty to die will not be imposed on citizens equally.