

Euthanasia in the Netherlands: the facts

During a recent televised interview, mr. Rick Santorum, Republican Presidential Candidate, talked about euthanasia in the Netherlands. Unfortunately, there were some slight inadequacies in his presentation of the situation in the Netherlands with regards to euthanasia. This might lead to misunderstandings in the general public. The Royal Dutch Medical Association (RDMA), the professional organization for physicians of The Netherlands, would like to clarify the facts on euthanasia in the Netherlands.

Is it true 10% of the number of deaths are a result of euthanasia?

In 2010, 136,058 people died in the Netherlands. In the same year, there were 3,136 reported cases of euthanasia. So, in reality 2,3% of deaths were due to euthanasia. The vast majority of these causes (81%) were people in the final stages of cancer, with the euthanasia usually performed at home by the family physician.

Is it true 50% of all euthanasia cases are involuntary?

There has never been a case report of involuntary euthanasia in the Netherlands. If a physician would perform involuntary euthanasia, he would be prosecuted under criminal law. However, since the law on euthanasia was established in 2001, no doctors have been prosecuted under this law.

In the Netherlands, euthanasia means ‘termination of life by a doctor at the request of a patient’. Physicians can only perform euthanasia when certain criteria are met. The most important of these criteria are that there has to be a voluntary and well-considered request by the patient and there has to be unbearable suffering without prospect of improvement. The attending physician has to consult at least one other physician with no connection to the case, who must state in writing that the attending physician has satisfied the due care criteria. After the euthanasia is performed, an independent review board will review the case, to see whether the due care criteria are met.

In 2010, out of 3,136 reported cases of euthanasia, 9 cases were considered to be not in accordance with the due care criteria. In five of these cases, the reason for this was the way the euthanasia was medically performed.

Do people in the Netherlands wear bracelets saying ‘do not euthanize me’?

‘Do not euthanize me’ bracelets do not exist. Occasionally people will wear a ‘do not resuscitate me’ (DNR) bracelet or necklace. In one hospital experiments are going on with patients being given a DNR-bracelet if they do not want to receive advanced life support whilst they are in the hospital.