Q. Is Euthanasia morally right for those with incurable illnesses?

A. Never let it be said that we have fled from the hard questions. First let’s go to the dictionary to see what this word actually means. According to Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary (1979) euthanasia is rooted as a Greek word meaning “easy death.” In English usage it is defined as “the act or practice of killing individuals (as persons or domestic animals) that are hopelessly sick or injured for reasons of mercy.”

Before we begin we must refer to other articles discussing morals and ethics. Remember, morals are core values, ethics is conduct relative to morals. As such, morals - core values - simply are what a given person or society believes to be the essence of what they perceive the framework of their existence is to be judged and governed. Core values, in this sense are not necessarily right or wrong but they are not negotiable for the given entity. So the short answer is that if the persons involved (the patient and the ‘killer’) believe that euthanasia is ok, then such an act would be moral to them. The same judgement applies to a society as well. However, if they do not believe thus, then euthanasia is not moral. However, North American society has not clearly defined what its core values (morals) are in relationship to euthanasia. Therefore, we feel that it is useful to examine the question at length as it is instructive about the problems that arise from not having well defined core values (morals). Please note that laws are not core values, they are simply rules that require interpretation.

The remainder of this answer is not to be interpreted as our position on the question. It is designed to raise the reader’s awareness of the complexity and confusion of the matter, and point to the types of problems associated with young societies dealing with major core value matters.

The Webster definition raises a lot of issues.

First is the matter of killing. Many adversaries to euthanasia use a platform that it is wrong, or unethical, or against common religious beliefs to kill for any reason. These individuals are also strongly opposed to suicide and see patient requested euthanasia as suicide (also thus a sin).

At first blush this seems reasonable and defensible. However, closer examination yields many contradictions and problems which require a tighter look at the core values of each society examining the matter. For instance, the matter of suicide has been proven to be highly flexible in our society. While we have laws against such, we are currently witnessing widely publicized acts of assisted suicide. Apart from this, our history is complete with many war heros who have been awarded high honors post humously. The reason the medals were awarded post humously is because the recipient did something that was certain to cause his/her death in order to win an objective or to save his/her companions from further hardship. This suggests that our society not only condones, but rewards and idolizes suicides that further the objectives of the society.

In the matter of killing, we will limit this discussion to a very narrow perspective to allow a little brevity. Euthanasia of hurt animals is not only common practice, but well supported and considered humane by this society. In fact, the term has been extended to include killing animals who are not hurt, but inconvenient as in humane societies - note the odd word of humane
*human* applied to animal control - euthanating (killing) animals without owners. It takes only a small application of logic to question why it is ok to kill animals but not ok to kill humans. The question is what constitutes life. We see this question as essential to the nature of each society and its core values. One might argue that on the basis of humaneness, utility and convenience, it appears that this society believes it is acceptable to kill animals, thus acceptable to kill inconvenient or hopelessly injured humans as they too are animals.

Second is the matter of hopelessness.

Let us think about what the word hopeless means. It means without any prospect of change in a positive direction, without hope. Essentially what this means is that there is no quality of life, no hope of quality of life, no hope of remediation for the afflicted. If the society in question believes in quality of life, there is a moral basis for euthanasia. If the society in question believes in liberty and justice, there is a moral basis for euthanasia provided that the patient or afflicted is capable of making self determination.

Third is the matter of mercy.

This matter questions whether or not it is merciful to sustain a life beyond the point in which the life can be “lived” and whether or not it is just or merciful to extend the suffering of a life when that life has expressly requested the end of its misery.

If we are so quick to extend mercy to animals, why are we so slow to do the same for ourselves? Is it the fear of law suits, is it the financial reward to hospitals and care centers that maintains the system, or is it because we, as a society, have not yet dealt with essential core values affecting the issue?

We believe that the problem is the latter. In earlier times medicine was incapable of extending life beyond its endurance, and society did not have the resources to invest in such behavior. Therefore, there was no need to develop core values on the matter.

With advances in both medical and financial capacity, our society has been overwhelmed by a serious and highly complex moral issue that is -

What do we, as individuals and as a society, believe to be the essential truth about life?

Until this resolved it is virtually impossible to answer your question in general. You can only answer for yourself, and we can only answer for ourselves. Eventually, over time, society will develop its own sense of core values on this issue.

This question is not going to be settled quickly or easily. In coming years there should be an increase in court actions and battles between medical care professionals, insurance companies and the insured, as well as those who seek to define the course of their lives through carefully crafted wills and accompanying documents.