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Letters ...

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Letter from Finland

Since my last letter two important official statements have appeared here. The first one I would like to take up is the collection of instructions issued by the Ministry of Health concerning terminal care. The Instruction arose from the discussion about terminal care and euthanasia which was especially lively at the turn of the decade. For some reason the discussion is lamer today, maybe partly following the official standpoint taken by the health authorities; there is nothing sensational worth headlining in the newspapers any more.

The guiding principle in the Instruction is that once a patient has been defined as being in a terminal state, medical care should, and indeed, must not prolong a life full of suffering. This may appear as a courageous standpoint to be taken by an official organization. It is, however, clearly stated that information about the prognosis and planned medical attention must be conveyed by the responsible physician to the patient and relatives as well as nursing staff. And only if consensus is reached can extraordinary measures be refrained from. In practice the Instruction is a note of approval of what is common practice in terminal care in Scandinavia, and, I hope, in all countries where modern medical treatment can prolong life unnecessarily. The Instruction does not, of course, allow refrainment from therapy in patients with any prognosis *quo ad vitam*.

The Instruction has never generated any widespread debate, which must be

interpreted as general agreement of the ethical tone used in the paper. As a Catholic in the overwhelmingly Lutheran Finland, I would state that the Instruction is worth reading and meditating over by any physician, because it is one of the few examples of a document that comes as close to good medical ethics as any.

The other official statement that has been discussed here recently is the "Comment by the (Finnish Lutheran) bishops on questions of family and sexual ethics" (ISBN 951-600-654-X). The bishops' comments are a summary of the experiences gained from practical work and is not a theological document, which, in fact, would be odd to come from Protestant church leaders. The comment is edited as a booklet of 103 pages encompassing issues like pre- and extramarital sex, sexual education of children and young people, divorce, unmarried couples living together and homosexuality. The discussion in the press after the release of the Comment was unexpectedly lively, but mainly critical. The bishops do not approve of homosexuality, which gave rise to much public criticism. The bishops took also a strict attitude (although much more liberal than the Catholic) against abortion, which was regarded as something rather unexpected. The booklet was considered to be too conservative and this was accused as being a consequence of all the bishops being men. (Female priesthood is the number one topic of the discussion within the Lutheran church in Finland; Sweden has had female priests for years.)

The juridical status of children born by insemination with an unknown donor's sperm is being debated in Finland as well as Sweden. Maybe I can write about the state of this issue in my next letter to the *Linacre Quarterly*.

Dr. Robert Paul