Alzheimer's disease, the soft target of the euthanasia debate

May 24 2013

(Medical Xpress)—The way Alzheimer's disease is portrayed by advocacy groups and the media is having undue influence on the euthanasia debate, according to a Deakin University nursing ethics professor.

Deakin's Professor Megan-Jane Johnstone has examined the 'Alzheimerisation' of the euthanasia debate in a new book - 'Alzheimer's disease, media representations and the politics of euthanasia: constructing risk and selling death in an aging society' - based on her extensive research into the media representations of Alzheimer's and the shift in public attitudes towards euthanasia.

"Alzheimer's has been portrayed as the 'disease of the century' that is poised to have a near catastrophic impact on the world's healthcare system as the population ages," Professor Johnstone said.

"This representation of the disease—along with other often used terms such as 'living dead', a 'funeral that never ends' and a 'fate worse than death'—places Alzheimer's as a soft target in the euthanasia debate because it plays to people's fears of developing the disease and what it symbolises. It positions Alzheimer's as something that requires a remedy; that remedy increasingly being pre-emptive and beneficent euthanasia."

Professor Johnstone acknowledges that euthanasia is a polarising and emotive issue, however she warns that the public could be unduly swayed by the way the media, and pro-euthanasia groups, frame the

issue as 'simply a matter of choice' and through the use of highly personalised, individual experiences.

"Euthanasia is far from a simple matter of choice, as choice itself is no simple matter; it is an extremely complex phenomenon. And Alzheimer's disease cannot be adequately portrayed through highly publicised individual cases," Professor Johnstone explained.

"But this is the messaging coming through the media and influencing the public's perception of Alzheimer's disease and euthanasia, and calls into question the credibility of public opinion and opinion polls on which future public policy could be considered."

Professor Johnstone's book is not a treatise on the arguments for or against euthanasia and does not take a position either way.

"My hope is that the book will open people's eyes to the 'Alzheimerisation' of the euthanasia debate and encourage them to critically evaluate the messages they are receiving from all sides of the debate," Professor Johnstone said.

"The proposal to allow euthanasia as a morally warranted option in the treatment of Alzheimer's disease and other dementias is neither simple nor straightforward.

"Anything less than an honest, transparent and accountable debate, which has been lacking to date, would be an assault on the integrity of all—both those for and against the euthanasia proposal—who are trying in their own ways to care for those who are confronting the hard-nosed reality of their inevitable mortality."

Provided by Deakin University

Citation: Alzheimer's disease, the soft target of the euthanasia debate (2013, May 24) retrieved 25 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-05-alzheimer-disease-soft-euthanasia-debate.html

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