

Since the time of Hippocrates, a fundamental tenet of medical ethics, a cornerstone of professionalism, and an expectation of the public, has been that those who profess to accept the responsibilities of providing healthcare do not deliberately kill their patients. This commitment, coupled with the other virtues of the healing arts, has allowed society to trust and empower healthcare professionals with unique and tremendous yet restricted freedoms, expecting that those professionals would use those freedoms to pursue the best interests of their patients and the public health.

Despite the proven importance of the well-established principle that healthcare professionals must not, and will not, kill, and the clear historical record of the tragedies that have occurred when this boundary has been breached, there is a growing movement within and outside of medicine for the legalization of assisted suicide (the use of medical knowledge, judgment and licensure to provide the patient with the means for committing suicide, usually a prescription for a lethal overdose of medications) and euthanasia (the direct provision of lethal quantities of medications into the patient for the sole purpose of causing death). The stark nature of these killing acts has been obscured by euphemistic yet ethically equivalent terms such as “mercy killing,” “aid in dying,” and “assistance in dying” based on a putative “right to die.”

The unifying term “medical killing” is hereafter used to denote inclusively physician-assisted suicide, euthanasia, and all variations in which medical expertise or assistance deliberately causes the death of the patient, in contrast to end-of-life circumstances in which disease processes or medical events are the unintended proximate cause of death.

The relaxation or eradication of the historical prohibitions against healthcare professionals' deliberate killing is unethical, places unnecessary and inappropriate power in the hands of fallible human beings, and will result in the corruption of medicine as an enterprise worthy of individual and public trust. Medical killing by any name turns healthcare professionals into killers.