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Brian L. Mishara , David N. Weisstub
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Practical Ethics in Suicide

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*Research, Policy and Clinical
Decision-Making*

Brian L. Mishara

Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada

David N. Weisstub

*International Academy of Law and Mental Health and
Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada*



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Preface

Suicide is a major health problem worldwide. According to World Health Organization (WHO) data, almost 700,000 people die by suicide each year (World Health Organization, 2021a). There are more deaths by suicide annually than in all wars, conflicts, terrorist acts, and homicides combined. Surprisingly, there are fewer research studies on suicide than on many less common causes of mortality. This is at least in part because ethical considerations lead to limitations on the nature of research investigations on the subject. The first part of this book examines specific ethical issues concerning suicide research, policies, and practices. The latter chapters focus on the ethical and legal quandaries surrounding another intentional means of ending one's life, Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD), which includes the practices of euthanasia and assisted suicide.

The issues are explored through case studies and examples, including: the role of telephone helplines and internet assistance, questions surrounding identifying a genetic basis for suicidal behaviour, the historical precedents of mental illness treatments, and specific legal and ethical approaches to MAiD.

Ethical perspectives are presented on the acceptability of suicidal behaviours and the obligations and limitations of intervening to prevent suicides. In suicide interventions, lives are potentially at stake. For this reason, intervention protocols must clarify if extreme measures are to be undertaken to save a life, and we must decide whether research protocols should be held to a higher standard than for studies of less consequential matters. Ethical concerns may influence whether or not potentially life-saving interventions will be undertaken, and under which circumstances, as well as what is permissible in research studies. It is our premise that the resolution of ethical issues concerning suicide is not based upon

straightforward applications of general ethical principles or guidelines. Both explicit and implicit moral and ethical beliefs that may vary depending upon the circumstances inevitably influence decisions we make.

The issue of MAiD, the Canadian label for the practices of active euthanasia and assisted suicide, is often designated as posing ethical challenges that are different from the issues concerning suicide prevention. Both MAiD and suicide involve an intentional decision to die prematurely. We demonstrate that there is substantial overlap in the ethical implications of these two domains, which we analyse in several chapters in this volume.

Articulation of clear moral premises is essential in determining how common ethical issues concerning suicide may be resolved. In general, we do not promote a specific moral position but believe that it is useful to explore implicit moral premises and their ethical bases in order to understand current practices and to decide upon future policies and courses of action. However, on several issues, we expose a penchant towards reserving death as a solution of last resort. Before examining specific ethical dilemmas, we describe several paradigmatic positions concerning suicide in Chapter 1, in order to facilitate analyses of ethical issues that arise in diverse contexts.

Suicide has been topical since ancient times, whether in the Judaeo-Christian tradition of theological commentaries, or in the hands of preeminent philosophers who considered suicide a subject worthy of contemplation. In these traditions, a wealth of material has emerged over the centuries that has directed our attention to where to place suicide, whether it should be perceived as an elevated act of ending life to achieve a memorial of reaching to the clouds, or as a tragic act of dejection, defeat, and misery. Celebrated philosophical analyses have been the subject of public debates and more recently have been witnessed by larger and larger groups through social media, journalism, and town hall discussions, often of a highly vocal nature. In a certain sense, intentionally ending life by suicide or MAiD has become central to the questions about the type of society that we wish to support: For example: How much credit do we wish to give to individual decision-making, even when the individual is



handicapped mentally or physically? What are the limits of respect to be given to professionals arriving out of the elite bodies of law and medicine?

This book concerns people who may be faced with difficult decisions about life and death, most of whom have not been schooled in the illustrious debates of prior centuries. We can ask what value there is in philosophising for hands-on practitioners who function in a Good-Samaritan role. What are the consequences of simplifying nuanced philosophical standpoints and applying them to the world of practitioners? It is our view that an examination of our ethical premises and alternative perspectives can help clarify the morally grey areas that present themselves in suicide prevention.

The positions we present in this volume should be regarded as a starting point, meant to stimulate discussion. This book aims to encourage people who have committed their lives to suicide prevention and research to engage in discussions and debate, to help better understand the moral implications of decisions that they, our institutions, and our societies are making.

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