

# Euthanasia, Ethics and Theology: A Dutch Perspective

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*In 2002, the Netherlands was the first country in the world to legalize euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide. What does the Dutch euthanasia practice look like? What are the insights gained from twelve years of experience in regulating and reviewing euthanasia cases? In this article, some observations about the practice and the backgrounds of euthanasia are made from the perspective of a theological ethicist.*

**Keywords:** *euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, review committees, Netherlands, ethics, theology*

## Introduction

The Netherlands is one of the few countries in which euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide (PAS) have been legalized.<sup>1</sup> Legalization was preceded by a process of deliberation and a practice of tolerance. In the mid-1980s the Royal Dutch Medical Association (RDMA) and the Public Prosecutor agreed that if a set of strict conditions were to be met, a doctor performing euthanasia would not be persecuted. Euthanasia was defined as “active life termination by a doctor, at the patient’s request”.<sup>2</sup> The termination of a person’s life without his or her request is not referred to as ‘euthanasia’ and does not fall under the criteria.

The criteria include that there must be a voluntary and informed request, the suffering is experienced as unbearable, there is no prospect of improvement, there are no acceptable alternatives, a second doctor has been consulted, and the euthanasia must meet state-of-the-art medical standards. Every case of euthanasia had to be reported to the Public Prosecutor who would assess whether the criteria had been met. From 1998 on, five Regional Review Committees, consisting of a lawyer, a doctor, and an ethicist took over the Public Prosecutor’s task. Like the Public Prosecutor, they would assess a

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, wherever ‘euthanasia’ is used, please read “euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide”.

<sup>2</sup> Staatscommissie Euthanasie, *Rapport van de Staatscommissie Euthanasie: Advies*, Den Haag, Staatsuitgeverij 1985.