

AFTER

Nikki Gemmell

Fourth Estate, 2017

ISBN 978-1-4607-5305-7

Nikki Gemmell is a successful Australian writer with a string of novels and children's books to her credit.

This book is about the tsunami of emotional, psychological and physical problems after her mother 'euthanised' herself; Gemmell doesn't like 'suicide' because it implies the unhinged and irrational. Gemmell's mother had problems with intractable, unresponsive pain, which left her dependent and crippled.

Gemmell's relationship with her mother was tumultuous. 'If I had my life over I never would have had kids,' her mother said. Later in the book, the daughter admits that she wished her mother dead at times. Interestingly, Gemmell notes that un-maternal mothers do exist, but says they should not be judged. And despite the years of antagonism, she feels no relief after her mother's death; she describes her life as hell. The abandonment. We didn't listen enough. The words unsaid. Everything is upended. Catapulted into crisis. 'With her final act [mother] has altered my future. She has been attempting to do this since my teenage years...But finally, with this...she has crushed me.'

Philip Nitschke, long-time advocate of euthanasia and assisted dying tells Gemmell that her mother contacted his organisation Exit International and that she had (illegally) imported nembutal. He describes this as empowerment. And he adds that anyone opposing his views is either not mature or is suffering 'religious claptrap'.

Gemmell wrote about these issues in her weekly column in the national newspaper *The Australian*, and was inundated with responses. A selection of these is presented in the book, providing pithy insights into the problems with laws and with the medical system. Like the woman who said her husband's advanced cancer 'threw him into the willing arms of the medical fraternity who don't know when to stop.'

Gemmell goes on to provide what I thought was a reasonably balanced discussion about assisted dying. Coming from the autonomy/choice position, she comes to the conclusion that assisted dying should be legalized, stating that the embracing of individual choice is the mark of a mature nation. 'If the perpetrator's family cannot, by law, be involved in the wishes of the person wanting to die, you are condemning that person to a horrendously bleak and lonely death. And there will be many people left reeling in the wake of that death.'

I don't necessarily disagree with those sentiments, but I will never support the legalization of assisted dying because of what it brings with it. In every jurisdiction where assisted dying has been legalized, there has been disregard for the laws and safeguards that were put in place to prevent abuse and misuse of these practices. I have concerns that the majority of the medical profession are not adequately trained to formally assess decision-making capacity, and lack the psychiatrist's skills to make sure no patients with treatable conditions like depression go down the assisted dying path (and that includes me, on both counts). Many doctors cope poorly with severe pain or suffering and rapidly resort to the 'nothing more can be done' position, which is half way to assisted dying. How can you be sure the person is not being pressured by family or socioeconomic issues? How do you manage people who feel a burden or who are 'tired of life'? Where do you draw the line? 'Euthanasia creep' is inevitable—when legalization of assisted dying for a very limited group of people in very limited circumstances is expanded to include more people in more situations. In the words of Robert Twycross: 'Once the barrier of legislation is passed, medically assisted dying takes on a dynamic of its own and extends beyond the original intent, despite earlier explicit assurances that this would not happen.' Or Herbert Hendin:

'Virtually every guideline set up by the Dutch—a voluntary, well considered, persistent request; intolerable suffering that cannot be relieved; consultation; and reporting of cases—has failed to protect patients or has been modified or violated.' Remember the one thousand patients a year that were euthanased without request, never mind consent, in the Netherlands? Now the Dutch doctors say that in 50% of the cases where palliative or terminal sedation is used, the intention is to hasten the death of the patient, i.e. it is euthanasia. The Belgians have championed the cause that euthanasia is a normal part of palliative care, and there are now moves afoot in Canada to censure any palliative care service that declines to provide assisted dying.

Gemmell's book is excellent and I had trouble putting it down. It is a dreadful story and extremely personal. But she writes so well and the emotional aspects of the turmoil are vividly portrayed. I would happily recommend this book to anyone who works in palliative care. You will be drawn into her story and it provides a raft of issues on which to reflect—where the current system doesn't work, where it's doing harm. On the legalization issue, Gemmell and I start from different positions and with different data and, not surprisingly, come to different conclusions. Again, lots to think about.

Roger Woodruff
(June 2017)

Reproduced with permission from the International Association for Hospice and Palliative Care (IAHPC) Newsletter at www.hospicecare.com