

# Euthanasia, homosexuality forbidden — ethicist

**Shira Sebban**

EUTHANASIA is murder and categorically forbidden by Jewish law. And homosexuals should strive to lead a heterosexual life. These are the considered views of visiting Jewish medical ethics scholar Rabbi Dr Nisson Shulman, speaking in Sydney this week.

"Life is of infinite value, so a piece of life is too," he declared. "Taking away a piece of life is killing a person. You cannot take the life of any individual because it's as if you're destroying the world."

Nevertheless, the former rabbi of Central Synagogue, visiting from New York's Yeshiva University, said a terminally ill patient in intractable pain has the right to refuse treatment which will extend his life by less than a year. "All treatments have side-effects, and the patient is independent enough to decide whether to go through the anguish of chemotherapy or radical surgery just for a few more months. If it's for a year or more, the rabbis will try to convince the patient to undergo treatment because a year is regarded as permanent, rather than temporary, life, and we don't know how much longer than that the patient can live."

The treatment has to be a "tested and tried remedy", Rabbi Shulman said. "Experimental quackery is not in order. Even though the patient might only have a few minutes of life left, magic or hocus-pocus is out."

Nothing can be done if a patient refuses treatment, hydration or nutrition. "Doctors can't treat people against their will, never mind what we think is good for them. That's assault. We don't consider hydration and nutrition as treatment. We don't think a person has the right to starve to death or to die of dehydration rather than the disease. If a

doctor refuses to hydrate or feed someone because he is a terminal patient, or says, 'he wants water, so let him get up and get it', that's murder. If a patient refuses food or water, we would try and convince him otherwise, but we cannot force someone to eat or drink."

Life-support machinery should not be set up if it would only serve as an impediment to a patient struggling to die, Rabbi Shulman said. "Once a person is in possession of a breathing apparatus, however, he can't be removed from it unless you know the patient is dead because such removal may kill the patient. So Rabbi Moshe Feinstein suggested that given that such machines need to be serviced, and since breathing independently is a major measure of when a person is dead, this can be checked before the machine is re-attached."

A person in a coma is usually not in pain, and while the family can legally request that treatment be withheld, *Halachically*, he or she should continue to be supported. As Rabbi Shulman writes in *Jewish Answers to Medical Ethics Questions*, "It is better to err in favour of unnecessary continued therapy than to risk passive euthanasia. The latter could be the top of the 'slippery slope', leading to neglect of patients not deemed constructive or contributing members of society."

Jewish law permits abortion if the mother's life is at risk, or "if she might be suicidal. Orthodox rabbis concern themselves with a mother's mental health, and sometimes a foetus' condition is so upsetting to the mother that she might be ready to threaten suicide." Normally, however, the health of the foetus does not justify abortion. "Deafness and blindness are impediments, but do not warrant abortion because you can't kill a child in order to avoid a physical problem later."



**Rabbi Dr Nisson Shulman**

Couples who are Tay-Sachs carriers may resort to *in vitro* fertilisation. "The problem is what you do with the extra [embryos]. Bioethicist Rabbi Moshe Tendler said that as long as they're not viable in the petrie dish, they can be discarded or used for research."

As for homosexuality, it is an abomination according to the Torah, Rabbi Shulman said. "We don't change Torah; it's supposed to change our lives. That doesn't mean we lack compassion for the homosexual, his diseases and even for his struggle to overcome his homosexuality and his desire to avoid that struggle and remain a homosexual. But com-

passion doesn't mean agreement. There is an argument that has been voiced by many homosexuals, which is surprisingly similar to that voiced by many prone to what they consider to be genetic control. Criminals will say they were forced into a life of crime by their genetic make-up, and spouse abusers will say they're violent because of theirs.

"Judaism recognises that everyone has a struggle on a particular front to improve their life and lifestyle *vis-à-vis* God's commandments. For some, that's harder than for others. So it doesn't matter if there is a genetic ingredient or not. There are other ingredients, such as family and society, and we can't say these tendencies arise out of the blue. Even so, every human is required to strive to fulfil God's commandments, and in the case of homosexuality, it means leading a heterosexual life instead of a homosexual one. We have to help them in any way we can to achieve this, striving to correct such tendencies and to correct society as well."

It was the late Lord Immanuel Jakobovits who inspired Rabbi Shulman's interest in Jewish medical ethics. "He was the first rabbi of New York's Fifth Avenue Synagogue and I was the third. It was expected that I would continue on a medical ethics commission that he founded, and I did so for eight years." After serving as rabbi of Central Synagogue from 1985-88, Rabbi Shulman became director of the Department of Medical Ethics in the Office of the Chief Rabbi under Lord Jakobovits and Rabbi Dr Jonathan Sacks.

Rabbi Shulman will also visit Melbourne and Perth. This week, he participated in a conference on "Health and the Jewish Community" at Sydney Children's Hospital, organised by Wolper Jewish Hospital and the Multicultural Health Unit, giving the keynote address on Jewish bioethics.