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Culture of Death

By Wesley J. Smith- Review by Eleanore Godfrey

Wesley Smith's book, *Culture of Death*, reveals disturbing trends in our country's medical practices and health care laws. These include the rise of utilitarian or "quality of life" philosophy in medical decision-making and the downfall of the Hippocratic Oath. Smith, an attorney for the Anti-Euthanasia Task Force, warns readers of the deterioration of our society's values, as research animals are afforded greater protection by our laws than humans in medical research, assisted suicide is permitted, desired medical treatment is legally withheld from dying or disabled people, and medical decisions are based on utilitarian considerations and financial resources. *Culture of Death* alerts readers to the bioethics movement's deliberate undermining of the morals and principles that historically governed our medical system. Raising important issues regarding the sanctity of human life, *Culture of Death* offers tremendous insight into the continuing debate about our healthcare.

Smith argues that concerns for human equality and innate human rights have become secondary to utilitarian concerns, such as maximizing human happiness and minimizing suffering. Quoting philosophical treatises and citing real life examples,

Smith suggests that such an approach diminishes the importance of individual humans *per se* and eliminates the concept of objective right and wrong. According to Smith, modern bioethicists espouse a quality of life approach to medicine rather than a sanctity of life approach, meaning that subjective notions of human worth impact medical decision making, such as whether or not to continue life support or to continue supplying food and water to a quadriplegic patient. In *Culture of Death*, Smith warns that measuring human moral worth by a quality of life standard discriminates against the disabled or sick the same way that racism discriminates against people with different colored skin.

To demonstrate the danger of a utilitarian approach to medicine, Smith recounts examples of past and present medical research experiments designed in pursuit of the greater good. He compares the Nazi's exploitation of humans in medical experiments with the Tuskegee syphilis study in the United States, during which African American men with syphilis were observed for decades as their health deteriorated until they eventually died. Additionally, Smith recounts more recent experiments such as a study conducted at the University of Oklahoma designed to establish criteria, including socioeconomic factors, for deciding whether or not a baby with spina bifida should receive medical treatment or be allowed to die based on perceptions of whether the baby's life was worth saving. While such incidents are hopefully infrequent in the United States, Smith's highlights the strikingly similar intellectual foundations of these experiments: they were all performed for the good of science, the advancement of knowledge and the benefit of society.

In *Culture of Death*, Smith argues that modern bioethicists promote medical discrimination by legitimizing the withholding of medical care from dying or even merely disabled people. Smith reports that disabled babies are now neglected to death as a matter of routine medical practice in the United States, should the parents so desire. Recounting horrific stories of the intentional dehydration of cognitively disabled people who receive their food and water through a feeding tube, a practice legal in all fifty states, Smith provides yet another example of the danger of adhering to bioethical, quality of life values. Worse yet, Smith alerts readers that in some states it is permissible to dehydrate *conscious* people with cognitive disabilities who require a feeding tube.

Smith also rejects assisted suicide and euthanasia policies in favor of improving care for the dying and disabled. All suicidal people feel that their life is not worth living, and therefore Smith sees no distinction between rational and irrational suicide. By condoning assisted suicide and euthanasia, Smith believes society equally promotes death as a solution to people who are terminally ill, disabled, or merely depressed. *Culture of Death* suggests pain control and compassionate care as alternatives to assisted suicide, portraying death as a meaningful stage of life filled with possibilities for growth.

Futile Care Theory, which allows doctors to exercise their own judgment in ending life-extending medical treatment, even over the objections of the patient and family, is another danger that Smith exposes in *Culture of Death*. Smith contends that determination of futility of treatment is a subjective value judgment rather than a medical certainty. Futile care theory, Smith postulates, is merely a form of health care rationing allowing doctors to discontinue expensive medical treatments based on discrimination against those deemed to have a low quality of life.

A zealous advocate of the sanctity of life approach to medicine, Smith has done an excellent job exposing the influence of utilitarianism in modern medical practice. Although overall I found Smith's book very credible, at times Smith's language seemed emotionally biased. In a world of limited resources, oftentimes providing one patient with the best possible care will work to the detriment of many others. Smith failed to adequately address how we can justify disregarding utilitarian concerns in *all* situations.

In *Culture of Death* Smith discusses many of the most important legal and medical issues of our times. He persuasively affirms that all people are created with equal moral worth. In this forceful, if emotional novel, Smith compels the reader to see the dangers of a utilitarian approach to bioethics. For readers who want more information regarding the issues discussed in *Culture of Death*, Smith provides a list of organizations in the acknowledgements section of his book.