Correspondence

Killing and voluntary euthanasia

SIR

The examples of ‘mercy killing’ cited in paragraph two of the article Raping and making love are different concepts: so are killing and voluntary euthanasia (1988;14:148–149), include the following: ‘a doctor who gave an unusually large morphine injection to a patient dying of cancer was found “not guilty” of murder by a jury which brought in a perverse verdict’. This surely amounts to saying that the doctor was not only guilty, but that he was guilty of murdering his patient, an offence with which he was not even charged. Such an allegation, followed by the identification of the doctor by name, is not only offensive, but can hardly fail to be damaging.

There is, I am afraid, little chance of the reference to the doctor passing unnoticed, particularly in the relevant locality, where detailed reports of the trial were published daily for over a fortnight. The case must have been of particular interest to you readers, not only because the defendant was a doctor, but because the prosecution was instigated by the doctors at the local hospice, who provided most of the evidence, and were the principal witnesses for the prosecution.

It is not clear why the article draws attention to this very controversial case not only by assuming that it was necessarily an example of mercy killing, but also by mentioning the doctor by name when the other cases cited are left anonymous. In the circumstances, however, it seems particularly important that the facts should be accurately reported, and I must protest at the misleading statements in the article, especially as they are claimed to derive from my report in the newsletter.

I look forward to the publication of a correction.

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Correction

Raping and making love are different concepts: so are killing and voluntary euthanasia. Jean Davies, Journal of Medical Ethics 1988; 14:148–149.

Mrs McBride’s letter was sent to Jean Davies, for comment and as a result the lines in the first column of her paper: ‘a doctor who gave an unusually large morphine injection to a patient dying of cancer was found “not guilty” of murder by a jury which brought in a perverse verdict’ should be corrected as follows: ‘a doctor who gave an unusually large phenobarbitone injection to a patient dying of cancer was found “not guilty” of the charge of attempted murder by a jury which brought in a perverse verdict’.

We apologise to readers for the original inaccuracies. No implication that the doctor concerned was guilty is entailed or intended by the use of the term ‘perverse verdict’ – only that the jury’s verdict went in the opposite direction to that of the judge’s summing up.

The Editor has been assured by the doctor concerned that no offence has been taken by him.

Editor
Killing and voluntary euthanasia.

M McBride

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