What is a dignified life?

The limits for when life is worth living are constantly changing. How long should we actually continue to treat a dementia patient who has lost the ability to speak and remember?

Our average lifespan continues to increase as scientist come up with new treatment forms. We get older and more of us get dementia before we die. Doctors have also become better at keeping premature babies alive.

While the biomedical developments extend our lives, they also force doctors and relatives to make tough decisions about life and death. Will a premature baby born with severe handicaps lead a dignified life, or would it perhaps be better to suspend treatment and let the child die?

What lengths should we go to in order to treat life-threatening diseases in a demented patient who no longer has the ability to speak and remember?

Changing views on a dignified life

A new Danish research project has now set out to find the answers to these questions. The basic premise is that there are no natural truths about what constitutes a dignified life, says the leader of the project:

"Our view of when a human life is dignified is culturally conditioned and has changed throughout history," says Mette Nordahl Svendsen, an anthropologist and associate professor at the Department of Public Health at the University of Copenhagen, Denmark.

"Some 20-30 years ago, people died of old age, but today this cause of death has all but disappeared. Today, old people die as a result of heart failure or Alzheimer’s. The societal context and the dilemmas concerning a dignified life have changed, and that means the basis on which you make your decisions has also changed."

Animals give ‘life’ to humans

Instead of speculating about an ultimate answer to these existential questions, Svendsen and her colleagues will be conducting interviews and observations in nursing homes for people with dementia, in neonatal wards and in animal laboratories, where animals act as proxies in the development of medical treatment.

The objective of the study is to learn how doctors, relatives and medical researchers approach, practice and understand the notion of a dignified life.

Animal laboratories are relevant to the study, since they form the basis of what physicians have learned about saving premature babies and prolonging the lives of dementia patients, explains Svendsen:

“The treatments that are developed to prolong or sustain life for seriously ill elderly people or premature babies are often based on animal tests. We could, for instance, not have developed the technologies currently used in neonatal departments had it not been for animal trials.”
Pigs used as tools

Most of us would probably agree, to some extent at least, that a pig’s life is worth less than a human life. We therefore have no ethical qualms about eating pork, or about taking medicine that has been tested on laboratory pigs.

"However, there is no law of nature which states that one creature is more worthy of living than another. It is the man-made social and cultural practices that make us perceive some forms of life as more worthy of living and preserving than others.”

When we do not regard the pig as a creature worthy of living, but rather as a source of food or a tool to keep humans alive, it exemplifies how our view of the value of a creature’s life is shaped by the historical and social context we are part of.

"The pig is similar to man, both genetically and anatomically, and it is more intelligent than the dog. But its historical status as a production animal makes it ethically uncontroversial. The lack of debates on the pig’s moral status is closely linked to its history as an economic resource,” says Svendsen.

A foetus is part of a greater context

When we perceive it as morally responsible to use e.g. pigs as tools to save or preserve the lives of premature babies and dementia patients, it is because through time, we have developed social and cultural practices that have made a human life more valuable than that of an animal.

“It’s all about how we as a culture regard the human condition: from the moment a baby is born – even during pregnancy – the child is thought of as creature with a life history that belongs to a family and thus also forms part of a larger community,” she says.

"When a laboratory pig is used as a model for humans, the family aspect is absent. In the lab, the pig is usually pure biology, and not a creature with a life history as such.”

A pig’s life and death is planned

The value of a pig’s life is reduced and its status as a tool is reinforced, as laboratory staff make a record of how its life should proceed. This record has an end date, which determines when the big will be killed:

"While a baby is regarded as a creature with a life history and an unpredictable life ahead of it, a pig’s life and death are planned from the very start.”

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Read the Danish version of this article at videnskab.dk [8]

Can a premature baby born with severe handicaps lead a dignified life? A new research project aims to find out. (Photo: Colourbox) [9]

dignified baby.jpg [10]

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