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Right to Death A Thorny Issue

CALIFORNIA has enacted a law allowing terminally ill persons to claim the right to die by discontinuing medical treatment.

The question has been discussed in Oklahoma and other states, because decisions must be made as to when life prolonging treatments should be given or not given.

Hopelessly ill, suffering patients and distressed families, as well as sympathetic doctors and nurses, may feel that use of respirators and other devices sometimes prolong dying, while they are prolonging life.

The California law will allow a healthy or sick adult to sign a "living will" authorizing attending physicians to discontinue treatment when hope of recovery is lost.

Opponents of the "right to die" law call it a step toward euthanasia, which would permit positive action to terminate life as an act of mercy. This, too, has been discussed for decades, but the new law does not go that far.

One of the first recorded crimes was murder, and literally billions of people have been slain by their fellows in war, fits of anger, personal feuds and politics.

Fear of misuse of the power of death disturbs opponents of the "right to die" concept. Others do not believe that humans have any right to make life and death decisions.

Earlier this year, psychologists asked several hundred people in Maryland and the District of Columbia, "What is the least amount of

mercy you would take to push a button to kill a person inside a black box — no one would ever know what you did?"

Of those who had never killed or tried to, 25 per cent said they would do it, for an average price of \$50,000. Of those who had killed before, 45 per cent said they would murder for money, with an average price of \$20,000.

One of the psychologists concluded that "lethality feeds upon itself." This deliberate taking of life may be somewhat different from "mercy death", but a hazard exists that the latter might be used for the sake of greed, as well as for mercy.

A 1975 Oklahoma law defines death as "irreversible total cessation of brain function." Yet, in some cases, bodies may be maintained in functioning condition for indefinite times after the brains have ceased to be aware of existence.

This was brought out in a well-publicized case this year, when a New Jersey father went to court asking authority to discontinue use of a respirator for his daughter, who had been in a coma for months. It was disconnected, but she still lives.

Other cases involve the pulling of the electric plug by a Massachusetts wife to terminate treatment for her dying husband, and a California man who unplugged his own kidney dialysis machine, because he said he was living in agony.

Lawyers are concerned about legal aspects of voluntary deaths, because somebody might be held accountable. Not everybody is legally, financially, emotionally or spiritually prepared for death to occur, even if granted the "right to die" physically. Death may become life's toughest decision.