

Death Codes Undergoing Changes

A New England judge has ruled a certain woman is incompetent to handle her finances but that she has "a right to die" and to refuse surgery or medical care that might prolong her life.

Thus the debate over control of a person's last days goes on. Some say doctors are the only ones qualified to decide whether life should go on; others fear they might abuse this power if they had it.

So many cases wind up in court, but judges are reluctant to make the decisions. Families are confused and may get into arguments over whether it is life or the process of dying that is prolonged.

The rate of deaths per thousand population is decreasing as progress is made for disease control and people are living longer, but a recent report shows that about two million Americans die annually, more than half of them from heart disease and cancer.

The Federal Trade Commission got involved in dying a couple of years ago but eased up on its regulations when its allegations against

funeral practices were refuted. Nevertheless, attitudes toward death are changing, apparently more rapidly and extensively than is realized.

Jack V. Boyd sent a copy of an essay titled "Invisible Death" by Philippe Aries, a French historian.

"Death is not a purely individual act, any more than life is," Aries writes. He declares that death always has been a social and public fact but that changing trends are concealing the reality of death.

"Except for the death of a statesman, society has banished death," Aries says. "In the towns, there is no way of knowing that something has happened. The old black and silver hearse has become an ordinary gray limousine, indistinguishable from the flow of traffic. Society no longer observes a pause; the disappearance of an individual no longer affects its continuity. Everything in town goes on as if nobody died anymore."

Although doctors cannot eliminate death, they may be able to control its duration, prolonging it from

the few hours it once was to several days, weeks, months, or even years. "Death is a failure," Aries concludes. "When death arrives, it is regarded as an accident, a sign of helplessness or clumsiness that must be put out of mind."

Many religious people regard death somewhat differently. They view death as a transition from life on earth to life hereafter. By no means do all of them fear death or take it lightly.

Even those who might not adhere to such beliefs may perpetuate a sort of "life after death." Two California inventors have devised a solar-powered tape recorder for use as an epitaph. It will play up to two hours of the grave occupant's recorded speech.

Still, few people expect death when it arrives. A current ad for a large insurance company depicts a healthy-looking man being taken from his weekly bowling match by two angels in white suits. As they escort him up an escalator to heaven, the man protests: "I thought I'd have more time." One angel responds: "Doesn't everybody?"