

Nitschke's euthanasia

Killing me softly. Voluntary euthanasia and the road to the peaceful pill. Philip Nitschke, Fiona Stewart. Melbourne: Penguin, 2005 (xi + 354pp, \$32.95). ISBN 0 14 300303 8.

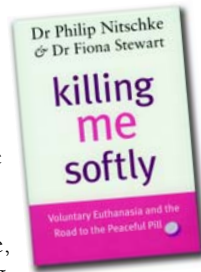
FOR ANY DOCTOR who has followed the euthanasia debate in Australia over the past decade, *Killing me softly* will provide some personal insight into the psyche of the leading protagonist for the pro-euthanasia argument, Dr Philip Nitschke.

In this book, written in a semi-autobiographical style, Nitschke narrates his journey as one of an activist-in-waiting, in search of a cause, who stumbles upon a cause célèbre.

That cause arrives in the form of the Northern Territory's Voluntary Euthanasia legislation.

Dr Nitschke himself is very critical of the medical profession and how he perceives our role in the end-of-life decisions of our patients. He describes himself as being possibly “the most harassed doctor in the country” and as the “chosen walnut ... to be ... crushed by the sledgehammer of the thought police”, but seems to see himself as the saviour of the sick and dying.

As you might expect with the first-person narrative of an extreme view, opposing or moderating opinions are articulated only for the purpose of contradicting them.



Nonetheless, the issues he raises are certainly of enormous relevance to many doctors and patients. It is his solution with which you might take issue. It is the very complexity of this ethical territory that stops governments from being able to formulate legislation to govern end-of-life decisions.

During my Presidency of the AMA, I argued, against some fierce opposition, to invite Nitschke to the 2002 AMA National Conference to participate in a policy debate on end-of-life decisions. This was based on the belief that good policy can only be formulated when the breadth of opinion is directly canvassed. The lively and at times passionate discussion on the conference floor demonstrated the ethical and practical dilemmas many doctors face in providing compassionate care for the dying patient.

Whether you agree or disagree with Nitschke's arguments for physician-assisted suicide or for the development of a “peaceful pill”, you are likely to agree or disagree strongly. I do not believe any doctor could read this book and remain impartial to its contents.

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