

Sanctity of Life vs. Quality of Life

The Culture War and its
Implications for Medical Care
and Treatment

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Underlying Concepts

- **Sanctity of Life:**

- All human life is sacred.
- All human life has inherent dignity.
- All human beings have a right to live.

- **Quality of Life:**

- Some human lives are not worth living.
- Some human lives cause suffering to others and burden society.
- We are all better off ending these human lives.

Historical Perspective

- Sanctity of Life dominated for 2,500 years.
- In the 1960's, philosophers with no medical training, called themselves Bioethicists and began claiming Quality of Life should control medical ethics.
- By the 1990's, Quality of Life was displacing Sanctity of Life.

Impact of Bioethics on Medicine

- At bioethics' heart is a “lifeboat ethic” that assumes “scarcity” of medical resources is a natural condition, not the result of prior economic, political and social choices.
- Bioethics promotes viewing medicine as a commodity delivered on the basis of economic efficiency.

Tom Koch, Thieves of Virtue: When Bioethics Stole Medicine MIT Press (2012).

Core Premises for Medical Care

Sanctity of Life

- The life and safety of each patient comes first.
- All human beings receive medical care regardless of their abilities or contributions to society.
- Care is proportionate to illness.
- The ideal of care is a communal value – we care about and care for one another.

Quality of Life

- Society's "needs" come first.
- Medical care is rationed according to patients' abilities and potential for contributions to society.
- Care is proportionate to normalcy.
- An isolating value – we care about and care for only those who can be returned to productivity.