Palliative and Supportive Care

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Rights and obligations

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Letter to the Editor

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Dear Sir,

I was browsing your website and came across William Breitbart's enthusiastic and significant editorial from 2008 entitled "Palliative care as a human right."

Declaring rights is important for setting standards and emplacing goals.

However, too often administrations and bureaucracies sit back and do nothing once they have signed off on "rights." They have ticked the box, go to various international meetings but fail to take the next step.

In this situation, rights can become wrongs.

Some countries terrorize and abuse their citizens but excuse themselves by noting they are members of the Human Rights Council.

Or, commonly heard today is, "It's my right," which it might be, but there is a sense that it is a righteous generation, one of the takers but not givers.

Hence, the question arises, what is the nature of a right. Is it to restrain an injustice or to enforce a positive value?

For example, in education, is it the right to abolish illiteracy or to guarantee a tertiary education for every citizen? Or, in health care, is it the right to be free of pain or to guarantee happiness?

Rights provide, obligations restrict.

Rights allow, permit, ensure, and enable are given. A right is a passive scripture upon the individual to receive. I have the right.

Whereas obligations constrain and limit freedoms, forcing people to decide. An obligation requires the individual to act. I am obligated.

Hence, even more important than *human rights* are *my obligations*. The word "obligate" derives from the same source as ligature, to bind, in our example, to action, either by legal or moral laws.

Declaring human rights can leave a warm bodily glow, however, fulfilling one's obligation leaves sweat on the brow.

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Reference

Breitbart W (2008) Palliative care as a human right. *Palliative and Supportive Care* **6**, 323–325.

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