

Killing newborns: Paper stirs debate, death threats

By [Nicky Park](#)

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Killing newborn babies should be allowed if the mother wishes, two Australian academics have argued in the British Medical Journals.

The report's authors, Dr Francesca Minerva, from the University of Melbourne and Dr Alberto Giubilini, from the University of Milan, say after-birth abortion should be considered late-term abortion because there isn't much of a difference between them biologically.



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In New Zealand, pregnancies under 12 weeks can be terminated in a licensed clinic. After this they must be carried out in a licensed hospital, according to The Contraception, Sterilisation, and Abortion Act. There is a formal procedure that must be followed and the woman must obtain the approval of two certifying consultants, one of whom must have experience in obstetrics.

The authors of the paper *After-birth abortion: why should the baby live?* argue that foetuses and babies that are hours old don't have the same "moral status as actual persons".

Dr Minerva says there are characteristics that define a person: "The ability to attribute a certain value to your own life, the ability to make plans for the future, the ability to appreciate and value that you are actually alive."

"These are things that can occur very early in life. We don't deny this, but that's why we talk about the very few days after birth. And that's the difference from infanticide – because an infant is different from a newborn."

The paper reads: "Abortion is largely accepted even for reasons that do not have anything to do with the foetus' health.

"By showing that (1) both foetuses and newborns do not have the same moral status as actual persons, (2) the fact that both are potential persons is morally irrelevant and (3) adoption is not always in the best interest of actual people, the authors argue that what we call 'after-birth abortion' (killing a newborn) should be permissible in all the cases where abortion is, including cases where the newborn is not disabled."

Dr Minerva says people don't usually have their baby terminated without good reason.

Aside from disease and disability, she says an after-birth abortion might be justified if a partner dies during pregnancy, leading to financial struggles, or if the parent fears giving up the baby for adoption.

"You could prefer that your child actually has an after-birth abortion instead of giving your child to an orphanage... because you come from some remote area of the world where orphanages are really bad places."

The definition of "newborn" hasn't been addressed in the paper, but Dr Minerva asks: "What makes the difference in that day? What happens? That's the question of the paper."

"Nothing really happens in that day. These attributes (the characteristics that define a person) start to develop a little later. I don't know when exactly."

There has been global backlash to the topics of the report published in the *Journal of Medical Ethics* last week.

Dr Minerva says she's received "hundreds and hundreds" of death threats. She says the report was written for academic debate so she's found the negative response surprising.

"If you take this paper out of the context it's really easy to misunderstand what's written in it and that, I think, is what's happening," said Dr Minerva, who's based at the Centre For Applied Philosophy and Public Ethics in Victoria.

"I'm not angry about the reaction, I understand why people react this way, but it's annoying to get all these messages."

Dr Matthew Flanagan, an ethicist and theologian from Auckland University, said the reasons that the paper outline for abortion should prompt a re-evaluation of the argument for termination at any stage.

"They have these arguments that have been widely accepted, and they say if you accept this we should support infanticide, but I think some of those arguments they make [about the value of life] are questionable.

"You can imagine people who are suffering from depression, they don't really value their own life, but we don't say, hey go and kill yourself.

"Once we realise that this conclusion is really shocking... maybe we should stop as a society ignoring this whole issue and actually start having a proper rational discussion and actual question whether those were good assumptions to have to begin with."

* Read the full journal article [here](#).

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