

# IS THERE A HUMANE WAY TO EXECUTE?

**Of all the many and varied types of execution – electrocution, hanging, shooting, gassing, stoning – lethal injection has emerged as the new method of choice for some because of its allegedly humane qualities. However, recent cases have led to a re-think on using lethal injection and whether there really is a humane way for the state to kill.**

The death penalty requires the state to carry out the very act most strongly condemned by international law. In virtually every legal system, the severest sanctions are deployed for the premeditated or cold-blooded killing of a human being. But no killing is more premeditated or cold-blooded than an execution. An execution, like physical forms of torture, involves a deliberate assault on a prisoner. Simply put, there is no humane way to put someone to death. It is not possible to find a way to execute a person which is not cruel, inhuman or degrading.

Over the past two centuries, approaches to execution have changed, from methods designed to maximize the suffering of prisoners, to the modern, functional approach taken by the majority of governments which still use capital punishment today. This functional attitude emphasizes the death of the prisoner rather than exaggerating the suffering caused by execution.

But every method of execution has been shown to be problematic and capable of causing prolonged suffering. Shooting, hanging and beheading have all failed on occasions to produce instant death and further violence was needed to kill the prisoner. Faced with these

grisly scenes, some governments have turned to lethal injection as the modern day method of killing.

On 10 February 1998, Guatemala used lethal injection for the first time to execute a prisoner. The condemned man was Manuel Martínez Coronado. But those charged with carrying out the procedure against him were apparently so nervous (reportedly due in part to the distressing sounds of the prisoner's wife and children weeping) that it took them a long time to attach the line that was to deliver the drugs needed to kill him. A power cut during the execution stopped the flow of the lethal drugs and it took the prisoner 18 minutes to die. The entire ordeal was broadcast live on state television.

In the USA, a number of lethal injection executions have been botched. Angel Diaz, a native of Puerto Rico who was sentenced to death for a murder committed in 1979, took 34 minutes to die by lethal injection on 13 December 2006. According to reports he was moving, grimacing and attempted to speak for over 20 minutes of that time. A second dose was required before a doctor, wearing a hood over his face to conceal his identity, signaled that Angel Diaz was dead.

The USA introduced execution by lethal injection almost 30 years ago, applying it for the first time in 1982 as the most "humane" way of putting someone to death. Since then, nearly 900 prisoners have been killed by this method in the USA, and it has all but replaced the alternative methods – electric chair, hanging, gassing and shooting. Nearly 20 years after its introduction into US law, lethal injection was adopted by China, Guatemala, the Philippines (although the Philippines subsequently abolished the death penalty in June 2006), Taiwan and Thailand.

The injection consists of lethal doses of three chemicals: sodium pentothal to induce general anaesthesia; pancuronium bromide to cause muscle paralysis; and potassium chloride to stop the heart. If inadequate levels of sodium pentothal are administered, the anaesthetic effect can wear off rapidly and the prisoner will experience excruciating pain as he or she goes into cardiac arrest. Moreover, their paralysis means that they will be unable to communicate their agony to anyone.

In some parts of the USA, it is against the law to use these chemicals to "humanely" put an animal to death. The use of pancuronium bromide for



Health professionals assist at the execution of Manuel Martínez Coronado, the first by lethal injection in Guatemala, February 1998.



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pet euthanasia is not acceptable under American Veterinary Medical Association guidelines, and its use has been banned in several states. In September 2003, for example, a new law came into force in Texas banning its use in the euthanasia of cats and dogs. Yet Texas is the state which uses lethal injection the most frequently for humans, having executed nearly 400 people by this method since 1982.

Lethal injection avoids many of the unpleasant effects of other forms of execution: bodily mutilation and bleeding due to decapitation, smell of burning flesh in electrocution, disturbing sights or sounds in lethal gassing and

hanging, the problem of involuntary defecation and urination. For these reasons, lethal injections may be less unpleasant for those involved in carrying out the execution. However, lethal injection increases the risk that medical personnel will be involved in killing for the state, in breach of long-standing principles of medical ethics.

The search for a “humane” way of killing people should be seen for what it is – a search to make executions more palatable to those carrying out the killing, to the governments that wish to appear humane, and to the public in whose name the killing is supposedly carried out.

“IT REALLY SOUNDS LIKE HE WAS TORTURED TO DEATH.”

Jonathan Groner MD, Ohio State Medical School, on the death of Angel Diaz by lethal injection in 2006

