In “A Crime of Compassion,” nurse Barbara Huttman writes about giving terminally ill patients more rights to choose when they want to die and believes laws need to be passed making it illegal to resuscitate seriously ill patients who no longer want to stay alive, especially when their lives are full of endless pain and suffering. Huttman’s belief was originally discussed when she was a guest on the Phil Donahue Show accused of murder for letting a terminally ill patient die. Huttman’s patient, Mac, had been a strong, healthy police officer who became a “60-pound skeleton” six months after being diagnosed with lung cancer (277). During those six months, Huttman says Mac almost died fifty two times, but was brought back to life because of a medical law which legally prevented nurses from allowing a patient to die. Mac lived in agony and Huttman
struggled with the Mac’s request “to let him die” every night as she “went home and . . . the smell of decaying flesh” was heavy on her clothes (277). Although Mac made it clear to Huttman that he no longer wanted to be resuscitated, she had no choice but to keep reviving Mac because his doctor refused to let Mac die since technology existed to keep him alive.

In considering the legal issues as well as the morality of this situation, Huttman feels that doctors and nurses have “become so arrogant” that they now believe “meddling in God’s work” is a “moral imperative” and possibly a “legal obligation” (278). However, Mac, not to mention his wife, suffered so much from his disease that he began begging Huttman to let him die. Finally, after Mac went code blue once again, Huttman made the agonizing decision to let him die and waited a few seconds longer than normal to press the code button, so there would be no chance for doctors to resuscitate Mac, much to his great appreciation. Although this was an extremely hard decision for Huttman to make, she came to the conclusion that due to the “death–denying society” (278) we currently live in, many people just cannot accept death. This includes the audience who verbally attacked her on the Donahue Show and accused her of murdering a patient. In addition, Huttman reminds us that doctors who rely on technology to keep patients alive against their will are a big part of the problem for not giving
terminally ill people the option to choose when they want to die. We have the technology to keep people alive even when they would prefer to no longer live. As Huttman states “we developed the means to prolong life, and now we are forced to use it. We do not have the right to die” (278).
Works Cited