



SENSE AND NONSENSE ON 'ASSISTED DYING'

'Assisted dying' is often in the news. There is a Private Member's bill before Parliament to try to legalise it. But just what is 'assisted dying'? What does the law say about it? What do doctors have to say about it? What does the Church say about it and what are the problems with it?

What exactly is 'assisted dying'?

'Assisted dying' really means assisting someone to commit suicide. It is the language used by those who want to change the law to legalise assisted suicide. A law permitting 'assisted dying' would licence doctors to supply lethal drugs to terminally ill patients.

Shouldn't everyone have the right to decide when and how they die?

An 'assisted dying' law could easily put vulnerable people at risk. There are real concerns that there is scope for such a law to be abused. For example, some terminally ill people might feel under pressure to end their lives, either from others or from feeling that they should remove a care or financial burden from their families. Others might wish to do so as a result of depression, a common feature of terminal illness. A 'right to die' could become a 'duty to die'.

Why should dying people be forced to stay alive and suffer?

End-of-life care in Britain has advanced hugely since the days when death was commonly associated with pain and suffering. An international survey by *The Economist* in 2010 ranked Britain top among 40 nations, including the United States, for quality of end-of-life care. What is needed is to ensure that everyone has access to the best palliative care available. In contrast, assisted suicide is a counsel of despair.

What's the law on this now?

It's against the law to encourage or assist another person's suicide. This reflects a widely-held view that, while people who attempt suicide should be treated with compassion, helping someone to commit suicide is not something that should be encouraged. Indeed, as a society we go to great lengths to prevent suicides.

What does the Church say about assisting suicide?

In a message addressed to Catholics in Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, Pope Francis said, "Even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor, are masterpieces of God's creation, made in his own image, destined to live for ever, and deserving of the utmost reverence and respect". The Church supports high quality care for the dying and protection for the weak and vulnerable. The Church teaches that life is a gift from God (*John* 10:10) and that suicide is the ultimate inability to accept the gift of life. Although attempting suicide should be treated with compassion rather than with blame, suicide should never be encouraged or promoted. Moreover the Church teaches that deliberately ending or helping to end someone else's life, even if that person may have requested it, is wrong. Those who take someone else's life take to themselves the power of life and death, which ultimately belongs to God.

What does the medical profession have to say about it?

The BMA and the Royal Colleges of Physicians, General Practitioners and Surgeons are opposed to legalising physician-assisted suicide. And most doctors don't regard it as a proper part of clinical practice - they are all too well aware from experience that dying patients can be vulnerable.

What's wrong with changing the law?

There are powerful practical reasons why the law shouldn't be changed. It's almost impossible to be sure that a request for assisted suicide from someone who is terminally ill reflects a clear and settled wish that has not been influenced by depression or pressure of one sort or another. Changing the law might give a very small number of strong-minded people what they want but it could easily put much larger numbers of vulnerable people at risk of harm.

Wouldn't there be safeguards in any legalised system?

Yes, but what safeguards and how effective would they be? In the tiny number of other countries where assisted suicide has been legalised there is emerging evidence that the safeguards don't work. For instance, some laws seek to restrict access to assisted suicide to terminally ill people who are in full possession of all their faculties and are acting freely. But prognosis of terminal illness is fraught with difficulty: terminally ill people often live for much longer than the predictions they are given when they are diagnosed - occasionally, they even recover. And the evidence from overseas shows that doctors have sometimes failed to spot clinical depression among those who have been supplied with lethal drugs to end their lives.

If I can end my life by refusing treatment, why can't I have medical help to end it?

Everyone has the legal right to refuse treatment, but patients who refuse treatment rarely do so in order to end their lives: they do it because they are finding the treatment burdensome and they want to let nature take its course. There's a world of difference, in medical ethics and in law, between accepting that death can't be prevented and seeking assistance to end your own life.

Don't doctors sometimes hasten patients' deaths under the guise of pain relief?

These days pain relief is a sophisticated science. When analgesics are properly prescribed and administered, there is no risk to the patient's life. Research has shown that in Britain illegal action of this kind by doctors is rare or non-existent.

British people are going to Switzerland to get help with suicide. Why should they not be able to get that help here?

Though every 'Swiss suicide' makes the headlines, only around 1 in every 25,000 deaths of Britons in the last 10 years has taken this form. The fact that a very small number of British people choose to seek assisted suicide in another country doesn't mean we should legalise the practice here. We make our own laws, and the legal protection of the weak and vulnerable is a fundamental duty of the state and of society.

For a PDF of this note, or to find out more about the moral, ethical and practical dangers of legalisation go to:
www.catholicnews.org.uk/assisted-suicide-information

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