End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

Patrick Fitch

Thank you very much for considering this submission as evidence for the End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill.

- Do you agree a person should be able to request end of life assistance from a registered medical practitioner?

I do not agree that the law should be changed to allow a person to request end of life assistance from a registered medical practitioner.

As a medical practitioner myself I see many frail or vulnerable people some of whom are close to the end of their natural life. Although most may be deemed mentally competent, there are degrees of "mental competence" and some may have limited understanding of their true situation and the alternatives, such as palliative care. For example they may come to believe that they have no reasonable alternative to assisted suicide or that they will be unable to die with dignity without opting for assisted suicide, which in my experience is not true (accepting that people may have differing definitions of dying with dignity). Despite the so-called safeguards I do not believe it is possible to fully safeguard some weak, vulnerable people from feeling pressure to opt for assisted suicide when that is not what they really want. I have also had patients who have believed themselves to be close to death who are not in fact close to death. Hopefully this can be recognised and rectified, but if it is not recognised a few may needlessly opt for assisted suicide.

Apparently the majority of people in Scotland favour the right to be able to chose assisted suicide if they wish, but I wonder whether people have considered the wider effect of such a law on society? I do see this bill as a threat to the current values of our society, where we care for people through their suffering, rather than abandoning them to thoughts of suicide. Lastly, what of the doctor – patient relationship? How will elderly vulnerable patients view their doctor if they know that their doctor is involved in physician-assisted suicide? Will they fear, albeit erroneously, that they may be subjected to euthanasia? I think it is these arguments that have persuaded so many of my colleagues in the medical profession that physician-assisted suicide is wrong and perhaps also why the British Medical Association opposed it.

Patrick Fitch
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