End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

Dominica Roberts

Pro Life Alliance

In general
The bill claims to provide means for people to "die with dignity and the minimum of distress", which is of course already provided by good healthcare and palliative medicine. The bill speaks euphemistically of "end of life assistance" throughout. It does not use the terms "physician assisted suicide" or "euthanasia" but is so widely and vaguely drafted that it would legalise both, not only for the terminally ill (although doctors admit this cannot always be accurately diagnosed), the incapacitated, and those with an "irreversible degenerative condition", but apparently for all who simply "find their life to be intolerable" for any reason. This would appear to include the depressed, those who have not had time to come to terms with a recent diagnosis of illness or incapacity, and in fact anyone who feels suicidal.

Patients sometimes do "request end of life assistance [in the sense of 'assistance to end their lives'] from a medical practitioner" but are almost invariably reassured by the provision of the excellent palliative care in which the United Kingdom leads the world, and which has improved enormously and is continuing to improve. The number of those who seriously want to end their lives, but could not do so, is minute.

To allow a physician deliberately to end a life would remove protection from tens of thousands of vulnerable Scottish people. There is strong evidence that unrecognised and therefore untreated depression in cancer patients is widespread, and that it is difficult to be sure that a request is truly voluntary and permanent.

Subsequent questions
To discuss details of who should qualify, and how a request should be processed, would imply agreement with the principle of the bill, whereas the Pro Life Alliance considers the entire basis of the bill to be fundamentally flawed.

Safeguards
No safeguards would be adequate to prevent serious abuses, as can be seen from Oregon and the Netherlands, but those suggested here are dangerously inadequate. We note particularly the omission of a compulsory system for reporting, of any authority with the duty to supervise, and of sanctions for non-compliance. There is no conscience clause, although the vast majority of physicians are unwilling to be complicit in taking lives.

Other considerations
Constant attempts to legalise forms of euthanasia are already causing anxiety to the disabled. The bill would cause rather than lessen distress among vulnerable groups, and imply that their lives are less worthy of protection than others. It would also lead to a dangerous change in the public view of suicide. The Scottish Parliament has twice rejected similar bills and should not proceed with this one.

The Pro Life Alliance is a Human Rights Group with members throughout the United Kingdom, including Scotland.

Mrs Dominica Roberts
Chairman
Pro Life Alliance