End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

Dr T F Benton

While I have already contributed to comments submitted by St Columba’s Hospice in Edinburgh, and along with other colleagues in Palliative Medicine, may I add my own personal observations.

These observations are based on twenty-seven years working in a hospice setting, caring for patients with far advanced disease. Over this period, I have seen considerable advances in the care of these individuals by staff working in the hospice, the hospital and the community setting.

As has been emphasised by many of my colleagues in clinical practice, legalisation of doctor-assisted suicide or active euthanasia will be open to abuse by the patient who will feel vulnerable and a burden, by his family who might see this as a means of relieving their own distress, and by caring but nevertheless hard pressed clinicians whose resources are under increasing pressure as we are living longer with chronic disease and disability.

In addition to these three issues, may I emphasise two other points: firstly, prognosis is so difficult to determine and assessing an individual’s prognosis with a particular condition is not an exact science, secondly, very occasionally there can still be doubt about a patient’s original diagnosis and it is only with the passage of time that the diagnosis is clarified or refuted.

The introduction of the Scottish Government’s ‘Living and Dying Well’ initiative is to be welcomed and is certainly the way forward, emphasising the need to continue to improve our care of patients with advanced illness who are often living longer with that illness when there is no prospect of cure.

I consider there is no place for any form of legalisation of doctor-assisted suicide or active euthanasia. In spite of the experience quoted in other countries, I consider the practical issues associated with the process - gaining consent, having that consent confirmed and then the procedure around the ending of a life, all insurmountable.

I ask the Committee to reject the legalisation of the proposals in this Bill.

Dr T F Benton
11 May 2010