End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

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Recently my mum aged 84 died of heart failure. She was well looked after both at home in her latter years and her final few weeks in hospital after a fall. Her breathing became critically difficult and her heart failed at one point and she was assisted with advanced technology to keep her breathing and eventually was able to breathe on her own again. This meant she had another three days in hospital and then died peacefully while waiting for visitors in the ward. I am thankful that the timing of her death was not up to her or us as a family. I am thankful it was not an option. Just today I was told of someone who is terminally ill and faces her suffering with heroic dignity. She does not want to end her life and all who go to visit her are uplifted by her example and encouragement to embrace life.

That period before my mother’s death was very precious in filling that final period with moments of deep sharing, bonding and peace both for her and for my sister, my brother and our families. I have witnessed many situations and know of families where that natural end of life period has been important for ensuring that in those final moments words are said to re-establish or consolidate relationships which can bring deep peace of mind to those involved. In these situations there was a deep trust and experience that the medical profession were doing their utmost to protect and maintain the life of the patient in their charge which is not the same as artificially prolonging it.

I really feel that the introduction of this Bill would undermine that degree of trust and cut short possibilities for individuals, families to bring their last moments to a “natural” conclusion and not one which is “manipulated”. Throughout life good relationships based on mutual respect, freedom, trust and love are crucial in determining our real health and well being. Evidence is that this is the building brick for “resilience” at all stages of our development. I have grown up in a very united and close family. I know it is a gift but it has been fostered by a deep belief in the sense that life is a real gift and has to be safeguarded. A logical conclusion and consequence of this is to value and safeguard the quality of our relationships at home, with our neighbours and with our wider community. Is not this what responsible citizenship is about?

I have been a teacher in secondary schools for the past 37 years. I love my job and working with young people. It is real privilege. I have always considered that one of my tasks is to help my students become responsible citizens which means showing utmost respect for themselves and others. This means being compassionate but also inculcating a deep sense of respect for life in all its stages and states of health. If we start introducing in our society and hospitals a sense that life is a “commodity” which can be disposed of when no longer useful I fear that all our relationships will continue to become more and more superficial and that capacity to really empathise and understand the real desires of others will eventually be lost.
What does it mean to die with dignity. There are terrible accidents, heart attacks, murders, elderly people dying on their own at home of hypothermia. Who is to say that in these deaths there is no dignity? I would prefer that we put our energy into the educational system which measures the quality of life that we are able to engender in all our relationships and genuinely helps people to care for one another. Is not friendship one of the best antidotes to depression and is not depression or not feeling valued a reason why many might get to the point of wanting to take their own life. I feel that this Bill sends out a message to our future generations that expediency or efficiency ie getting death over and done with quickly is what “dignity” means. I really fear that “selfish” individuals could abuse this Bill to make vulnerable people feel that their lives are not worth living. What about the doctors who might be conscientious objectors? Will they be made to feel they are not “compassionate”? Could there be a hidden agenda to save money by making people feel guilty if they are a drain on our health system? On whose authority can doctors be given the right to deliberately enable someone to take their life? Is this not simply legalising a “comfortable” suicide? How can you be sure that requests are made by someone who is mentally stable? It seems so much of the judgement here is subjective. How much time do psychiatrists have to get to know patients to deem them in a right mind to sign this Bill? Are people free to change their mind? Does this Bill give due consideration to the different cultures, faith communities, traditions which our multicultural Scotland holds.

I want to continue building a society where all people know they are valued regardless of age, state of health, academic qualifications and that the best possible palliative care is given to all who have terminal illness and that we support carers and those who are bereaved. I feel that this Bill is a step in a direction which I fear will move us toward a more “callous” consideration of life in general and a diminishment in the quality of all our relationships.

Thank you for attending to my response.

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