End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

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West of Scotland doctors and medical students

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

No, from neither a registered medical practitioner, nor anyone else.

Are you satisfied with the requirements for age and connection with Scotland as set out in the Bill?

No, no-one should be able to request killing regardless of age or connection with Scotland.

Are you satisfied with the two categories of people who would qualify to be assisted under the terms of the Bill?

No, the criteria are ambiguous and the safeguards are inadequate.

The Bill outlines a several stage consent and verification process that would be required to be followed for an eligible person to receive end of life assistance. Are you satisfied with this process?

No, no process or safeguards could ever be sufficient to avoid abuses or unintended outcomes.

Do you consider the level and nature of safeguards as set out in the Bill to be appropriate?

No, no process or safeguards could ever be sufficient to avoid abuses or unintended outcomes.

Do you have any other considerations on the Bill not included in answers to the above questions?

Yes – please see the following.

As medical students and doctors we wish to express grave concerns about Margo MacDonald’s End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill.

We hold that this assisted suicide/euthanasia bill is:

Immoral

Legalising a process that permits or requires an individual to act with the intention of killing another person is immoral (1). Does legitimising killing not undermine the public's perception of the value of human life?
Unethical and rejected by the medical profession

It goes against both historical and contemporary ethical frameworks. The Hippocratic Oath states, “I will not give a deadly drug to anybody who asked for it, not will I make a suggestion to this effect”. In 2002 the World Medical Association declared, “Physician-assisted suicide, like euthanasia, is unethical and must be condemned by the medical profession” (2). Because it is unethical, the British Medical Association and all of the medical Royal Colleges who have stated a position are opposed to physician-assisted suicide and euthanasia in principle and practice.

Unnecesary

A recent study of doctors’ experience of end of life issues suggested that only 0.16% percent of patients had made any request to die and that none had requested physician-assisted suicide (3). The same paper went on to suggest that only 2.6% of doctors felt a change in the law would be of any benefit.

Dangerous

It would put pressure on vulnerable patients and their families; it would result in overt and covert family conflict and suffering; it would give unacceptable power to doctors and put medical practitioners under undue pressure; it would put pressure on health boards to seek financial savings by killing instead of funding the ongoing development of high quality palliative care.

Impossible to regulate safely

In 1994 Lord Walton of Detchant, the chairperson of the Select Committee on Euthanasia described his concerns as follows; “We concluded that it was virtually impossible to ensure that all acts of euthanasia were truly voluntary and that any liberalisation of the law in the United Kingdom could not be abused. We were also concerned that vulnerable people - the elderly, lonely, sick or distressed - would feel pressure, whether real or imagined, to request early death” (4). These words remain true and relevant in Scotland today.

Only a beginning

Both Holland and Belgium have legalised euthanasia and have witnessed the gradual spread of so-called “mercy killings” to those who have not requested them, including the killing of children (5, 6).

Conclusions

We urge you, for the sake of the people of Scotland and the caring professions, please do not support this Bill. Thank you.

References
(1) “GP is disciplined for willingness to help friend commit suicide”, British Medical Journal, 2005; 331: 717.
(2) http://www.wma.net/en/30publications/10policies/e13b/index.html (accessed 7th May 2010)

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