End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

St Joseph’s Greenock branch of the Union of Catholic Mothers (UCM)

We recently wrote to both our constituency and list MSPs informing them of our concerns regarding the End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill, and in turn asking for their views. We have been to some extent relieved at their response, but felt that we would also seek to inform the committee of why we feel this Bill should not become law in Scotland:

This Bill seeks to allow people with terminal illnesses, or disabilities that they consider too much to live with, the right to ask someone else to end their life. There is nothing in this Bill that we feel we can, or you should, support, for a number of reasons:

Firstly it fails to recognise the advances in palliative care which mean that terminally ill people can now have a dignified death. Many will give testament to the work of the hospices, the McMillan nurses and others, in supporting those with terminal illness, and their families, at the end of their life.

The fear that is first encountered on being diagnosed with such an illness can be countered to a large extent by the provision of information on palliative care, and for the families, by the knowledge of the support they will have in caring for their relative. Indeed this was recognised by the Scottish Government’s action plan, Living and Dying Well: a national action plan for palliative and end of life care in Scotland, which was published in 2008. In this area we are also, most of us, speaking from experience, having coped with the deaths of parents and spouses whom we looked after.

The second point is the message that this Bill would send to vulnerable people, particularly the disabled, about what society thinks of their lives, and the stigma that it would inevitably result in attaching to those who chose to live, from others who can not contemplate that they may consider life worthwhile.

A third group of people would also be affected by this Bill; the doctors whose task it would be to implement it. To ask doctors to take part in actively ending life, would break the bond of trust with patients and erode their role as carer and healer. To put on someone else the responsibility of taking a life is, we feel, horrendous. It is a completely different moral issue from that of withholding or withdrawing life prolonging treatment (which the GMC already provides guidance for).

There are few details regarding the safeguards built into this Bill, for example there is very little information on how monitoring would take place, or how the review body would work (remit, composition etc), or indeed what the rights of doctors would be e.g. to opt in or out?
However we feel that there is no number of safeguards which could be built in to this Bill that would overcome our concern that it would be the first step, or the thin end of the wedge, to a much wider euthanasia policy. It is not hard to envisage that after this has become a procedure accepted, through moral drift and/or economics (consider the high price of drugs to treat cancer and rheumatoid arthritis, and the cost of care for those with dementia), that other vulnerable groups such as the ill or elderly may be made to feel that it would be their duty to choose death and not be a burden on their family or the state, and that this decision may also be made on behalf of those unable to consent for themselves, on the grounds that others know what is best for them. To ensure that economics or self-interest could always be removed from these decisions would be virtually impossible.

This may seem farfetched but one only has to compare the original stated aims of the abortion act, no matter what ones views on abortion are, to see how far the actual practice has drifted from this. No one envisaged the numbers of abortions that currently take place in Scotland annually.

We therefore feel, that as mothers who have cared for others, and have had the positive effect on our lives that this gives, as it does to all of those involved in the care of the ill and vulnerable in our society, that this bill should not become law.

Mrs R Travers
Secretary
St Joseph’s Branch of the UCM
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