



ASSISTED DYING/SUICIDE – Understanding the Debate

HOLY TRINITY TEWKESBURY

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Assisted dying/suicide – understanding the debate

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- ▶ A Private Member's Bill to be debated in Parliament will legalise assisted dying (suicide)
- ▶ Are you:
 - ▶ **In favour**
 - ▶ **Not sure**
 - ▶ **Against**

One view

- ▶ *“People are already killing themselves. Several hundred a year are blowing their brains out, taking overdoses... deciding to refuse treatment and starving themselves to death because they’re in such pain and agony to look away from the horror story of the situation is quite distressing.”*

- ▶ Kit Malthouse MP

Another View

- ▶ *It is precisely because personal tragedy makes such good journalistic copy, that there is a real and present danger that the debate will be decided by those who can tug at the heart strings most successfully.*
- ▶ *That, in itself, would be a tragedy. We owe it to ourselves to think about this issue, as well as just to feel it.*

▶ Nick Spencer, theologian



I am so pleased to know that you are celebrating your one hundredth birthday on 26th September, 2016. I send my congratulations and best wishes to you on such a special occasion.

Elizabeth

Mrs. Violet Simpkins

▶ *We should talk about these issues – not with condemnation, judgement or rhetoric but with tears in our eyes*

▶ Desmond Tutu

Assisted dying – understanding the debate

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AGENDA

1. KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS
2. REASONS IN FAVOUR
3. REASONS AGAINST
4. EXPERIENCE IN OTHER COUNTRIES
5. THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

**Time for questions after
each section**

Key Terms

- ▶ EUTHANASIA, mercy killing – The intentional medical killing, by act or omission, of an individual whose life is thought to be not worth living (could be with or without their consent)
- ▶ ASSISTED SUICIDE/DYING – The prescription and supply of lethal drugs by a doctor to a patient, at their request, in order to ensure that they kill themselves without complications
- ▶ "LIVING WILL" – A legally binding document that is used to refuse consent to specific treatments, such as life sustaining treatments, in the future

Key Terms

- ▶ PALLIATIVE CARE – A form of specialized medical and nursing care for patients once it is clear that curative treatment is unlikely to bring any benefit.
- ▶ The primary goal is the relief of pain and distressing symptoms, to help the person live as well as possible in the remaining time, rather than the active prolongation of life.

End of life care

Whether you are for or against assisted dying, you may support:

- ▶ Withdrawing critical care that might artificially extend a person's life
- ▶ Alleviating the pain and suffering of those nearing death, even in cases where such measures risk hastening the patient's demise

A Point of Clarity

- ▶ The change of law is not really about the “right to die”
- ▶ It is about the legal right to help patients kill themselves
- ▶ The proposed Assisted Dying law would give **other people** the **legal power** to help end another person’s life

Reasons for Assisted Dying

1. Compassion for the suffering
2. Autonomy and personal choice
3. There can be safeguards

1. Compassion for the suffering

- ▶ Allowing people to 'die with dignity' is kinder than forcing them to continue their lives with suffering

1. Compassion for the suffering

- ▶ It is our duty to provide the option of a quick and painless suicide for those suffering at the end of their lives.
- ▶ We must have empathy, and enter into the human suffering, fear and desperation of such people.
- ▶ A number of well-known Christians, such as Lord Carey and Desmond Tutu, have changed their minds and taken this view

2. Autonomy and Personal Choice

- ▶ *“I believe passionately that any individual should have the right to choose, as far as it is possible, the time and the conditions of their death. I think it’s time we learned to be as good at dying as we are at living.”* Terry Pratchett.
- ▶ *“I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul.”*
William Henley, *Invictus*.
- ▶ *“Twenty years ago it was about pain. Now it’s choice and control.”* *The Moral Maze*, BBC.

3. There can be safeguards

- ▶ Proponents believe that assisted suicide can be safely regulated by government legislation
- ▶ Approval would be required from two independent doctors and a high court judge
- ▶ Coercion of a patient would be a criminal offence punishable by up to 14 years in prison

▶ Questions ?

Reasons Against

1. The difficulty of determining terminal illness
2. The difficulty of defining safe criteria
3. The risk of financial pressures
4. Doctors and the Hippocratic oath
5. The alternative of palliative care
6. The impact on the vulnerable

1. Difficulty of defining and deciding what is 'terminal illness'

- ▶ Terminal illness = 'An advanced, progressive, incurable condition that would result in death within 6 months' (should this be 3,9,12 months?)
- ▶ Determining whether someone will die in 3, 6, 9 or 12 months is fraught with medical uncertainty in many cases

2. 'Safe criteria' – too many questions?

- ▶ How to define a “*clear, settled and informed wish*” to end one’s life?
- ▶ How long should someone sustain the decision to die - ‘an enduring and persisting choice’? (3 weeks?)
- ▶ What of ‘depressed’ patients? People suffering “appropriate sadness” should not be allowed to end their lives.
- ▶ How do we protect people against coercion/manipulation especially being a “burden on family, friends, care-givers”?

In reality there are no fully safe legal criteria or backstops

3. Risk of Financial Pressures

- ▶ Cancer patients could be offered Assisted Dying because it's cheaper for the state – no after care, a few cheap drugs
- ▶ Assisted dying could be attractive to those suffering while having to live in poverty and/or loneliness
- ▶ Nursing home residents who feel a financial burden on their families may convince themselves they should end their lives
- ▶ Cost of palliative care and the argument that NHS funding should go to younger patients rather than the terminally ill

4. Assisted Dying conflicts with a doctor's Hippocratic oath

- ▶ 'I will do no harm or injustice to them (my patients) neither will I administer a poison to anybody when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course..

Into whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrongdoing and harm'

- ▶ ***Many doctors are therefore against being asked to approve assisted dying for their patients***

5. The alternative of palliative care

- ▶ There is an alternative of better funded palliative care and hospices.
- ▶ We do not have to kill the patient to kill the symptoms. In the majority of cases, pain can be relieved.

6. The Impact on the Vulnerable

- ▶ Liz Carr, the disability campaigner, does not have a religious belief but has made a strong case against assisted dying
- ▶ Badly disabled people, and mentally ill people can be judged as incapable of a happy life ('better off dead') but this is not true
- ▶ It is deeply worrying that such people may be encouraged to end their perceived suffering – the 'slippery slope' when life is not seen as precious

▶ Questions ?

What has been the actual experience in
other countries of legalising assisted
dying?

- ▶ Netherlands
- ▶ Belgium
- ▶ Canada
- ▶ USA

Netherlands

- ▶ Euthanasia is allowed for those suffering from depression, anorexia and other psychiatric conditions.
- ▶ Mobile 'End of Life Clinics' were set up in 2012 for patients whose own doctor had said 'no' to their request for euthanasia.
- ▶ *"Euthanasia practice is running amok...I don't see how we can get the genie back in the bottle."*

Belgium

- ▶ Euthanasia since 2002, like the Netherlands but also, since 2014, children of any age with parental consent:
- ▶ Professional concerns that the law is:
 - ❑ promoting the “trivialisation” of euthanasia,
 - ❑ promoting “death as therapy”
 - ❑ and undermining the entire field of mental health

Canada

- ▶ Amir Farsoud was offered MAID on grounds of disability but he told his assessors the real reason was financial and potential homelessness.
- ▶ A reporter picked up his story and the public raised \$60,000 for him and now he's happy!
- ▶ A man who was told he had end-stage lung disease and was killed within 48hrs, was found to have been incorrectly diagnosed at post-mortem.

USA

- ▶ Euthanasia or Assisted suicide is a much cheaper 'option' than chemotherapy or surgery and has been encouraged by insurance companies.
- ▶ e.g. A 31 year old lady with cancer – chemotherapy would have added \$1000s to her health insurance premium but euthanasia was only \$1.20 extra! However, the insurance company paid for her treatment after the bad publicity.

A 'right to die' may soon become a 'duty to die'

- ▶ Any change in the law would have *“profound adverse affects on the social fabric of our society, on our attitudes towards each other’s deaths and illnesses, on our attitudes towards those who are ill and have disabilities.”*

▶ George Pitcher, Journalist

▶ Questions?

How do we think about assisted
dying as Christians ?



Psalm 23

- ▶ Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
- ▶ Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Christian Compassion

- ▶ **Every human life is valuable to God** – including lepers, demoniacs, the disabled, the paralysed etc
- ▶ We should care for **the whole person**, body and mind and soul, through end-of-life care that treats their physical and spiritual needs
- ▶ Please pray over your response to this issue



Vote 2

▶ For

▶ Not sure

▶ Against

If you interested to know more

- ▶ Liz Carr “Better Off Dead” BBC1 on iPlayer
- ▶ Dame Tanni Grey Thompson – “I’ve been told that if my life was like yours, I would kill myself” YouTube 11.3.2022
- ▶ www.care.org.uk – see topics section
- ▶ Right To Die? - by Professor John Wyatt .
- ▶ Assisted Suicide - by Vaughan Roberts

Write to your MP- you can use: <https://care.org.uk/cause/assisted-suicide>

- ▶ As your constituent, I am writing to raise my concerns about legislation to introduce 'assisted dying'. Wherever you stand on this issue personally, its dangers are clear and have been set out in many parliamentary debates over the years.
- ▶ Where the law has changed around the world, being a burden on family, friends and caregivers is consistently cited as one of the main end-of-life concerns for those dying under those laws. Changing the law here would have a similarly profound cultural impact.
- ▶ I'm also concerned that assisted suicide would lead to both overt and unseen pressure on elderly, disabled, and marginalised people – including those living in poverty – to consider the “option” because they do not have sufficient health, social, and welfare support.
- ▶ Some people argue that we need assisted suicide. Not if we ensure the availability of good end of life care, to deal with the fear of a painful, undignified end. This country leads the way in palliative care but much more investment is needed in this area of medicine.

▶ **Thank you all for coming**