

BHA BRIEFING 2010: Assisted Dying, House of Commons Debate

Wednesday 10th March

Briefing from the British Humanist Association (BHA):

Adjournment Debate: Law on assisted suicide - Ms Patricia Hewitt

The BHA's position

The BHA has long been involved in the debates around assisted dying. Humanists defend the right of each individual to live by her¹ own personal values, and the freedom to make decisions about her own life so long as this does not result in harm to others. Humanists do not share some of the attitudes to death and dying held by some religious believers, in particular that the manner and time of death are for a deity to decide or that interference in the course of nature is unacceptable.

Currently, the needs and autonomy of patients are often disregarded. Compassionate doctors, who follow the wishes of their terminally ill and severely suffering patients by assisting them to die, risk being charged with assisting suicide or murder. The current system sometimes also results in close relatives being faced with immensely difficult choices: whether to assist a loved one who is begging for help to put an end to their suffering knowing that it is unlawful, or to deny their loved one the death they want.

We do not believe that anyone should be put into the position of having to make such choices, or indeed into a position where they believe that they have no other option but personally to end the life of someone they love. Those few terminally ill and suffering people who are able to travel abroad to die, often die before it is necessary because they need to do so at a time when they are still able to travel.

We believe that people should be able to access good quality, patient-centred treatment and care at the end of life. Under a reformed law, the choice of an assisted death would not be instead of palliative care for terminally ill people, but a core part of comprehensive, patient-centred approach to end of life care available to as many people who want it.

It is our firm position that the law on assisted dying the UK is in need of extensive reform. We believe that legalisation, with strict safeguards in place, is ethically far preferable than our present law and would be by far the best way to protect vulnerable people.

Prosecution guidelines on assisted dying

The Director of Public Prosecution's final guidelines have been published following a public consultation on the interim guidelines in September 2009, and clarify the issues that will be taken into account when deciding whether or not to consent to the prosecution of individuals who assist someone to die, including when people have accompanied loved ones abroad for an assisted death.

The DPP Guidelines attempt to do in part what Parliament has thus far failed to, and that is to distinguish between where a person has compassionately assisted another to die, and where that was done with malicious intent or murder. That is a clarification that was badly needed and is to be welcomed. But these Guidelines will always be retrospective, after an assisted death has taken place. Terminally ill or incurably suffering people do not have full autonomy and choice at end of life, and those that are vulnerable are still at risk because legal safeguards, which would accompany the legalisation of assisted dying, are not in place to protect them from coercion or other malice.

We believe that the case for a change in the law on assisted dying is now even stronger.

¹ Read 'her' or 'his'

Independent inquiry

An independent inquiry would draw together and examine evidence from jurisdictions where assisted dying is legal, proving an invaluable resource for Parliamentarians and policy makers in any future work on this deeply important and sensitive issue.

The BHA supports an independent inquiry into law on assisted dying.

About us

The British Humanist Association is the national charity representing and supporting the interests of ethically concerned, non-religious people in the UK.

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