

BHA Briefing 2010: Debate – Inquiry into the law on assisted dying

Wednesday 3rd February, 5.30pm, Moses Room, House of Lords.

Question for a Short Debate:

Lord Warner to ask Her Majesty's Government what consideration they have given to holding an independent inquiry to examine the evidence relating to a change in the law on assisted dying for terminally ill adults.

The British Humanist Association (BHA) strongly encourages Peers to recommend to the Government the need for an independent inquiry into law on assisted dying. We believe there is an urgent need for reform to this area of the law, and the evidence base created by an independent inquiry would be an invaluable resource for Parliamentarians and policy makers in any future work on this deeply important issue.

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; and terminally ill, mentally competent adults should have the choice of an assisted death, within strict legal safeguards, if they feel their suffering is unbearable.

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.

An independent inquiry would draw together and examine evidence from jurisdictions where assisted dying is legal, proving invaluable resource to help towards evidence-based policy making on this sensitive issue.

¹ Read 'her or his'

Other support for an inquiry

- There is a substantial public demand for a change in the law, with a large number of people in favour of allowing terminally ill, mentally competent adults access to physician assisted suicide under legal safeguards. Surveys frequently indicate 80% of the public, religious and non-religious, are in favour of legalising assisted dying for terminally ill adults². A recent Number 10 petition, calling for 'an independent commission to investigate the impact of an assisted dying for the terminally ill law and to guarantee enough parliamentary time for debate, and if necessary, act upon, the findings', was signed by 3,746 people.
- There is also strong support from Parliamentarians from all Parties for a reform of the law.
- A number of organisations have called for a Royal Commission on assisted dying, including Dignity in Dying, the MS Society and the Royal College of Nursing.

Naomi Phillips
Head of Public Affairs
British Humanist Association
1 Gower Street
London WC1E 6HD

020 7079 3585
naomi@humanism.org.uk

² Clery, E. McLean, S. Phillips, M. (2007), 'Quickening death: the euthanasia debate' in Park, A. Curtice, J. Thompson, K. Phillips, M. Johnson, M. (eds.) *British Social Attitudes: the 23rd report*, Sage Publications: London. And 2004 YouGov Poll:
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