

LEGALISING ASSISTED SUICIDE PUTS VULNERABLE PEOPLE AT RISK

When the seriously ill and vulnerable are told that they can choose to end their lives it conveys the idea, however unintended, that they might be better off dead. This generates pressure for them to choose death. Where assisted suicide is legal, a major reason people who choose to end their lives is the feeling that they are a burden on others.

- In Oregon in 2020, 53.1% of people killed by assisted suicide cited a fear of being a “burden on family, friends/caregivers” as a reason to end their lives.¹
- In Washington State in 2018, 51% of people killed by assisted suicide said that being a burden on family, friends and caregivers was a reason to take their lives.²

One study has found that vulnerable people considering assisted suicide to be “strongly influenced by fears, sadness and loneliness”. It also raised concerns about a culture that would “increase social pressure on older people and reinforce negative ideas surrounding old age”.³

An estimated 7% to 9% of older people in Scotland are victims of at least one form of abuse, with over 40% of victims suffering more than one type of abuse.⁴ A recent report found that more than a third of older people in Scotland believe they are a burden on society, while 34% felt life was getting worse for older people.⁵ In such an atmosphere, older people are likely to feel pressure to end their lives.

DISABLED PEOPLE FEAR ASSISTED SUICIDE.

Many people with disabilities fear being pressured to end their lives. Speaking about the Assisted Dying Bill in the House of Lords on 22 October 2021, Baroness Grey-Thompson stated:

“Many people have also said to me, ‘If my life was like yours, I would kill myself.’ I have a huge amount of privilege in my life, but if people think this, it becomes very easy for them to conflate disability and a six-month diagnosis, and decide that we have no right to live.”⁶

Proponents of “assisted dying” insist that it is not about disability. However, while people with disabilities are not usually terminally ill, the terminally ill are almost always disabled.⁷ Although intractable pain is often emphasised as the primary reason for enacting assisted suicide legislation, the top five reasons doctors in Oregon report for issuing lethal prescriptions are:

- “loss of autonomy” – 91%
- “less able to engage in activities” – 89%
- “loss of dignity” – 81%
- “loss of control of bodily functions” – 50%
- “feelings of being a burden” – 40%⁸

These situations are commonly experienced by disabled people and the impact that a change in the law would have on them cannot be dismissed simply by insisting that the Bill is not about the disabled.



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Baroness Grey-Thompson DBE argued that “it is fundamentally wrong to have assisted dying on the NHS when there is no right to palliative care”.⁹ Our response to failures in health care provision should be to offer practical help and human empathy, not to make disabled people feel they ought to choose death. The establishment of assisted suicide as public policy will reinforce negative stereotypes of disability and the social conditions that add to the difficulties faced by disabled people.¹⁰

Legalisation will lead some vulnerable people to contemplate assisted suicide as a way to relieve family members, carers and broader society from the responsibility of providing care and support. In other words, if they perceive themselves as a burden, they may be encouraged to seek a premature death in the belief that it would benefit others.

The House of Lords Select Committee recognised this possibility in 1994, stating:

“We are also concerned that vulnerable people - the elderly, lonely, sick or distressed - would feel pressure, whether real or imagined, to request early death. We accept that, for the most part, requests resulting from such pressure or from remediable depressive illness would be identified as such by doctors and managed appropriately. Nevertheless, we believe that the message which society sends to vulnerable and disadvantaged people should not, however obliquely, encourage them to seek death, but should assure them of our care and support in life.”¹¹

While disabled people are not necessarily ill, many chronic and terminal conditions can result in disability. Several of the points made about the elderly and seriously ill people also apply to those made vulnerable through disability. It is therefore understandable that disabled people fear the legalisation of assisted suicide and that this is opposed by UK organisations working closely with and on behalf of disabled people. These include:

- Scope
- Action on Elder Abuse
- Mencap
- Veterans Association UK¹²

Many of those who have travelled to other jurisdictions for assisted suicide have done so due to disability-related issues. Legalising assisted suicide means that some people who say they want to die will receive suicide intervention, while others will receive suicide assistance. The distinction in how these two groups will be treated will depend upon the state of their health or disability status. This will lead to a two-tiered system that results in death for those who are less valued socially.¹³

1. Oregon Death with Dignity Act 2020 Data Summary
2. 2018 Death with Dignity Act Report (July 2019)
3. E van Wijngaarden et al (2017) Assisted dying for healthy older people: a step too far? *BMJ* 357:2298 Regional Euthanasia Review Committees RTE Annual Report 2019 <https://english.euthanasie-commissie.nl/the-committees/documents/publications/annual-reports/2002/annual-reports/annual-reports>
4. Age Concern Scotland, “Elder Abuse,” <https://www.ageconcern-scotland.org.uk/elder-abuse/>
5. Age Scotland, The Big Survey 2021, <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-scotland/documents/policy-and-research/high-4967-scotinfrom-age-scotland-big-survey---full-report.pdf> [accessed 11 October 2021]
6. Assisted Dying Bill [HL] Second Reading, Hansard, 22 October 2021, [https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-10-22/debates/11143CAF-BC66-4C60-B782-38B5D9F42810/AssistedDyingBill\(HL\)#contribution-ADCCAB-CD-B4E6-414B-8EBE-175C9C21735E](https://hansard.parliament.uk/Lords/2021-10-22/debates/11143CAF-BC66-4C60-B782-38B5D9F42810/AssistedDyingBill(HL)#contribution-ADCCAB-CD-B4E6-414B-8EBE-175C9C21735E)
7. Not Dead Yet, *Disability Rights Toolkit for Advocacy Against Legalization of Assisted Suicide*. <https://notdeadyet.org/disability-rights-toolkit-for-advocacy-against-legalization-of-assisted-suicide>
8. Oregon Death with Dignity Act 2020 Data Summary
9. Assisted Dying Bill [HL] Second Reading, *Hansard*, 22 October 2021
10. CJ Gill, “No, we don’t think our doctors are out to get us: Responding to the straw man distortions of disability rights arguments against assisted suicide.” (2010) *Disability & Health J* 3:31-38.
11. House of Lords Select Committee Report on Medical Ethics, HL 21-I, 31 January 1994, 49, para 239
12. Care Not Killing, “Charity chiefs denounce bill,” 17 July 2014 <http://www.carenotkilling.org.uk/letters/charity-chiefs-denounce-bill/>
13. Diane Coleman, “Not Dead Yet”, in *The Case against Assisted Suicide: For the Right to End-of-Life Care*, (K Foley & H Hendin eds, John Hopkins University Press, 2002), 221.