



SENSE AND NONSENSE ON 'ASSISTED DYING'

'Assisted dying' is often in the news. There is a Private Member's bill before Parliament to try to legalise it. But just what is 'assisted dying'? What does the law say about it? What do doctors have to say about it? What does the Church say about it and what are the problems with it?

What exactly is 'assisted dying'?

'Assisted dying' really means assisting someone to commit suicide. It is the language used by those who want to change the law to legalise assisted suicide. A law permitting 'assisted dying' would licence doctors to supply lethal drugs to terminally ill patients.

Shouldn't everyone have the right to decide when and how they die?

An 'assisted dying' law could easily put vulnerable people at risk. There are real concerns that there is scope for such a law to be abused. For example, some terminally ill people might feel under pressure to end their lives, either from others or from feeling that they should remove a care or financial burden from their families. Others might wish to do so as a result of depression, a common feature of terminal illness. A 'right to die' could become a 'duty to die'.

Why should dying people be forced to stay alive and suffer?

End-of-life care in Britain has advanced hugely since the days when death was commonly associated with pain and suffering. An international survey by *The Economist* in 2010 ranked Britain top among 40 nations, including the United States, for quality of end-of-life care. What is needed is to ensure that everyone has access to the best palliative care available. In contrast, assisted suicide is a counsel of despair.

What's the law on this now?

It's against the law to encourage or assist another person's suicide. This reflects a widely-held view that, while people who attempt suicide should be treated with compassion, helping someone to commit suicide is not something that should be encouraged. Indeed, as a society we go to great lengths to prevent suicides.

What does the Church say about assisting suicide?

In a message addressed to Catholics in Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales, Pope Francis said, "Even the weakest and most vulnerable, the sick, the old, the unborn and the poor, are masterpieces of God's creation, made in his own image, destined to live for ever, and deserving of the utmost reverence and respect". The Church supports high quality care for the dying and protection for the weak and vulnerable. The Church teaches that life is a gift from God (*John* 10:10) and that suicide is the ultimate inability to accept the gift of life. Although attempting suicide should be treated with compassion rather than with blame, suicide should never be encouraged or promoted. Moreover the Church teaches that deliberately ending or helping to end someone else's life, even if that person may have requested it, is wrong. Those who take someone else's life take to themselves the power of life and death, which ultimately belongs to God.