

France takes a step closer to legalising euthanasia

By Henry Samuel

FRANCE moved a step closer to legalising euthanasia yesterday when its medical ethics council ruled that assisted suicide should be allowed when ailing patients made "persistent, lucid and repeated requests" to end their lives.

Using the term "assisted death" rather than "euthanasia", the council invoked a "duty to humanity" to allow a patient "suffering from an ailment for which the treatment has become ineffective" to die.

A medical team, not a sole doctor, would take the decision.

The council's conclusions came after President François Hollande asked it to examine the precise circumstances under which such steps could be authorised, with a view to tabling draft legislation by June.

He had said changes were necessary because "the existing legislation does not meet the legitimate concerns expressed by people who are gravely and incurably ill".

A 2005 law already authorises doctors to administer pain-killing drugs at levels they know will, as a secondary effect, shorten a patient's life.

"However, the law can offer no solution to certain cases of prolonged agony or to psychological and/or physical pain that, despite the means employed, remain uncontrollable," said the council.

In these rare cases, the patient should be allowed to be administered "suitable, deep and terminal sedation", it added.

A report recently presented to the council found that there was widespread dissatisfaction among terminally ill patients and their families over a "cure at all costs" culture in the medical establishment.

It had called for doctors to be allowed to take moves to hasten death for terminal patients in three specific sets of circumstances:

Cases in which the patient issued an explicit request or gave advance instructions in the event of him or her becoming incapable of expressing an opinion.

Cases in which medical teams withdrew treatment following a request by the family of a dying and unconscious patient.

Cases in which treatment was serving only to sustain life artificially.

Prof Didier Sicard, the author of the report, stressed that he did not support any measures which "suddenly and prematurely end life".

"We are radically opposed to inscribing euthanasia in law," he said.

He also came out against Swiss-style clinics where people were provided with lethal medication to enable them to end their own lives.

There about 3,000 euthanasia cases in France annually on average, all of them illegal, according to the country's national demographics council.