

'Right-to-die' supporters take up battle to change law

Lucy Bannerman

Five Britons suffering a range of medical conditions including stroke, cancer and multiple sclerosis have joined a renewed attempt to change the law on assisted suicide.

They have signed statements in support of "L", the car crash victim who this month won the right to continue the fight of Tony Nicklinson, a sufferer of locked-in syndrome, to die with the help of a doctor.

The signatories believe that they represent a significant proportion of the public facing deteriorating health who would prefer a doctor to be able legally to end their life at a time of their choosing.

Two sufferers of multiple sclerosis — Mike Carlisle, a father of two from Manchester, and Colin Campbell, an IT contractor from Inverness — are among the signatories who claim that they represent a growing number of people who want a change in the laws governing assisted suicide.

The others are Pat Homer, 74, who suffers from oculopharyngodistal myopathy, a muscle wasting disease, Sally MacGregor, 57, who has had balance and speech problems since a series of strokes, and "C", 60, who has breast cancer.

Their lawyer, Saimo Chahal, of the law firm Bindmans, who also represented Mr Nicklinson, said that several people had come forward since the campaigner's death offering to pursue his case through the courts.

"It's unfinished business for many people. Tony Nicklinson started a debate which these supporters and others like them wish to see resolved in their favour," she said.

"They are prepared to fight all the way and to show the world that the current law is out of touch with modern-day values about autonomy and dignity.

"They want to show that the right to die peacefully, painlessly and with family and friends around them with a doctor's help is not some subversive

idea but a fundamental principle about controlling one's destiny until the last moment of life."

The five signatories have submitted statements in support of "L", a 57-year-old father of two who has been paralysed for 23 years. He won the right to be added to an appeal lodged by Mr Nicklinson's widow, Jane, at a hearing at the High Court in London earlier this month.

In a high-profile case last August, three judges refused Mr Nicklinson a judicial review, concluding that the current law prohibiting a third party from ending his life did not breach human rights and it was for Parlia-

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Saimo Chahal, solicitor

ment, not the courts, to decide whether it should be changed. The judges found that it would be wrong for the courts to depart from the long-established legal position that "voluntary euthanasia is murder, however understandable the motives may be".

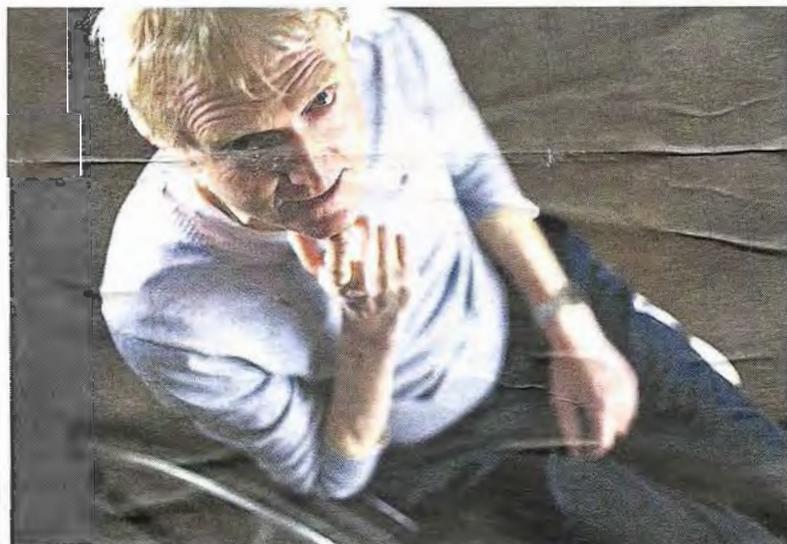
Mr Nicklinson, 58, died at home in Melksham, Wiltshire, a week later.

Opponents argue that changing the

law would effectively legalise killing and risks putting vulnerable people under undue pressure.

Alistair Thompson, a spokesman for the Care Not Killing alliance, said: "It is sad that the judgment last year, which so unequivocally rejected both cases, has not drawn a line under this legal debate.

"I hope that this appeal, which is supported by a tiny, tiny number of people, does not act as a distraction to decision-makers and society, which should be focused on how we care for the terminally ill and severely disabled ensuring everyone has the very best treatment and care."



Mike Carlisle, who suffers from MS, believes that public opinion is changing

'My life is no longer tolerable'

Case study

At the moment, Mike Carlisle has two options (Lucy Bannerman writes). The first, suicide, is not one he wants to attempt again.

Having taken an overdose of his medication, he knows the unpredictability of the outcome, the long-term problems if he survives and the distress to everyone around him.

The second option, a one-way trip to Switzerland, is a last resort he'd like to avoid. But he still finds it preferable to the alternative: enduring the worst stages of multiple sclerosis (MS). He believes that he should be allowed another way out, with the help of a doctor.

Mr Carlisle, 55, a father of two from Manchester, had MS diagnosed 13 years ago and has been using a wheelchair for three years. "I am not depressed," he said. "I've had a good life, but my life is no longer tolerable."

Unless the law is changed, he fears that those facing deteriorating

Colin Campbell: "It should be about choice"



health will be forced underground, as he was, surfing suicide websites instead of being reassured by the prospect of a painless death without fear of leaving anyone at risk of prosecution. "I think people get too fixed on the length of life rather than the quality of life," said Mr Carlisle, who is divorced and has a son, 32, and daughter, 30.

He believes that public opinion about euthanasia is changing after the death of Tony Nicklinson, and disagrees with religious groups who oppose a change in law. "It's a basic human right to have control over my life," he said.

Another MS sufferer, Colin Campbell, has also pledged his support. He is determined to avoid repeating the experience of his father, who had MS diagnosed when Colin was a teenager and who spent the latter part of his life in care homes.

Mr Campbell, 52, a former IT contractor from Inverness, contracted MS in his early thirties. "I saw what my father went through, and there's no way I'm going through that," he said.

"Everyone wants a long and healthy life but it should be about choice. It is not one size fits all."