

# Outcry after Amnesty sends out Dignity in Dying leaflets

BY SIMON CALDWELL

THE HEAD of one of Britain's largest charities for the disabled has quit Amnesty International after the human rights group began distributing literature arguing for a change in the law on assisted suicide.

Alice Maynard, the chairwoman of Scope, resigned her membership after she received a leaflet from Dignity in Dying – the group formerly known as the Voluntary Euthanasia Society – with a magazine sent out by Amnesty to its members.

She told Amnesty in a letter that it was "wholly inappropriate" for the powerful human rights group to assist the campaign because of the threat she felt assisted suicide posed to disabled people like herself.

"I regret to inform you that I am cancelling my monthly direct debit," wrote Miss Maynard, who suffers from spinal muscular atrophy and uses a wheelchair.

"I believe that Dignity in Dying's lobbying will lead to the most fundamental of human rights of disabled people like myself – the right to life – being violated."

Miss Maynard said she had financially supported Amnesty for about 10 years, paying "a lot more" than the £2 a month suggested by the group.

She said: "I think that the work that they do among prisoners of conscience and for human rights in different parts of the world, often in difficult circumstances, is very important."

But she said thought it was "unacceptable" for Amnesty even to be seen to be backing efforts to legalise assisted suicide or euthanasia.

"I do think they need to think about the implications of what they are doing ... and to think about what they are appearing to endorse," she said. "It [Amnesty] looks as if it is endorsing assisted suicide."

A spokesman for Amnesty said the group had no policy objections to disseminating leaflets on behalf of Dignity in Dying.

"We would only not carry a leaflet if it was at odds with our own policy position," said a spokesman. "Amnesty does not take a view on euthanasia in general, and recognises there are differing views on the matter."

The decision by Amnesty to distribute Dignity in Dying material coincides with the introduction of Private Member's Bill by the former Labour minister Lord Falconer in the

House of Lords, aimed at changing the law on assisted dying.

The Bill could lead to the legalisation of assisted suicide for the first time in British history by allowing lethal drugs to be prescribed to terminally ill patients considered as having less than six months to live.

Critics have said, however, that Lord Falconer's proposed safeguards will not work and that the disabled and the elderly, as well as the terminally ill, will be at risk from abuses.

Miss Maynard said: "Under what is being proposed my life would be in much greater jeopardy than it is at the moment."

"I don't think that the safeguards that are proposed are strong enough and I am not convinced at present that it is possible to put in adequate safeguards," she added.

"I don't see what adequate safeguards would look like. I can't envisage adequate safeguards."

Phil Friend, the convener of Not Dead Yet, an anti-euthanasia group



**Amnesty insists it 'does not take a view' on euthanasia**

for disabled people, of which Miss Maynard is a member, said that many disabled people feel threatened by the prospect of an assisted suicide law because they believe it will make them "extremely vulnerable" to people prejudiced against them.

The strength of feeling about the issue was underlined in September when the celebrated Paralympian Tanni Grey-Thompson described the Bill as "chilling".

"Lord Falconer's Bill, however well-intended, risks becoming a law to oblige the strong and the determined rather than to protect the weak and vulnerable," she wrote in an article in the *Times*.

Amnesty International was set up in 1961 by Oxford lawyer Peter Benenson, a convert to Catholicism, to fight for the release of prisoners of conscience, for fair trials for political prisoners and for an end to torture, ill-treatment, political killings, disappearances and the death penalty. It has grown to become one of the most powerful non-governmental organisations in the world, boasting more than two million members in more than 50 countries.