



# Stephen Glover

## A troubling Coronation Street plot and why I fear that euthanasia will be legal in 10 years

**O**NE of the most remarkable shifts in public opinion over the past few years concerns euthanasia. Not long ago, only a few seemingly rather cranky people campaigned in favour of it and 'assisted dying'.

But it seems lots of people in this country may now accept euthanasia. According to a poll in *The Sun* newspaper on Tuesday, 69 per cent of respondents 'would want the choice of assisted dying made available' to them if they became terminally ill. In an editorial, the paper endorsed assisted dying — the practice of inducing death in a sick patient, usually by an injection.

Unless those who remain opposed to euthanasia marshal their arguments rather better than they have, I won't be surprised if euthanasia is introduced in this country within ten years, or even sooner.

The subject has been recently embraced by Britain's most popular soap opera, *Coronation Street*. I confess I inwardly groaned when I heard this was happening, though I scarcely ever watch the programme.

Suspensions that the soap was being used as a vehicle for pro-euthanasia propaganda deepened when it emerged that Stuart Blackburn — Corrie's relatively new producer brought in to spice up the show a year ago — had explored the same theme when he was in charge of rival soap *Emmerdale*.

But having bathed myself in recent episodes, and watched a preview of next Monday's climax, I'm not so sure. The story is that Hayley Cropper — as sympathetic, decent and sensible a character as you could hope to find — takes her own life in the final stages of terminal pancreatic cancer.

It might be worth mentioning here that this is not the first time Hayley has caused a commotion. In 1998 she was introduced as the first transgender character in a British soap. Hayley used to be a man.

My guess is that the programme's producer is pro-euthanasia, but understands that the essence of good drama is to show both sides of an argument. For a time Hayley's loving husband Roy resists her plan to kill herself, though he finally acquiesces in next Monday's undeniably moving episode when Hayley ingests her lethal cocktail.

By the episode at the end of next week, though, Roy is starting to resent what Hayley has done to him and blames himself for not stopping her. In other words, euthanasia is not presented as a 'win-win' for everyone concerned.

Others may disagree, but to me the storyline nonetheless seems fractionally to endorse euthanasia. I say this because Hayley is one of the most grounded and balanced characters in Coronation Street. If such a person can go through with it, the soap seems to be saying, then anyone can.

**M**OREOVER, Julie Hesmondhalgh, the actress who plays Hayley, has been proselytising in favour of euthanasia and assisted dying in a number of media interviews. This deepens the impression that Corrie may not be as neutral as Stuart Blackburn maintained on Radio Four's Today programme yesterday morning.

That said — and this is crucial — it cops out of the central moral issue. Hayley kills herself, being still mobile and in possession of her faculties. She tells Roy not to touch the glass (whose deadly contents she has herself acquired) or play any part in her suicide. But it is so-called assisted

dying, not simply the much more ancient practice of euthanasia, which lies at the centre of the current public debate. Lord Falconer, the Labour peer and former best friend of Tony Blair, has already tried to introduce an Assisted Dying Bill in the Lords, and in May is going to have another shot.

And it is assisted dying that is spreading quickly in parts of Europe and a handful of U.S. states.

In a speech on Tuesday about the French economy, President Francois Hollande intimated that a Bill which could legitimise assisted dying will soon be submitted to the country's parliament.

He should first take a close look at what is happening in neighbouring Belgium. It is Belgium — not Switzerland, where the Dignitas clinic in Zurich has been at the centre of several high-profile cases — that is the assisted dying centre of Europe.

Since it was introduced in that country in 2002, the number of cases of assisted dying has risen from a handful to more than 1,400 a year. There was a 25 per cent increase between 2011 and 2012 alone. It seems that before long, thousands of people in Belgium will be killed off by injection.

Remarkably, last month, Belgium became the first country in the world to lift all age restrictions on assisted dying, raising the possibility that very sick children could

one day be helped by a doctor to die.

In a brilliant online article, the American journalist Elizabeth Kulze describes how one doctor, Marc Van Hoey, has been involved in the assisted deaths of 120 patients. Most of these are elderly, but he has aided in the death of a 34-year-old woman suffering from chronic and apparently incurable manic depression.

**T**HERE have been other alarming cases in Belgium. Deaf 45-year-old twin brothers were legally killed after learning that they had a genetic condition that would also cause them to lose their eyesight.

A 44-year-old man was bumped off on his request because of the unbearable psychological and physical suffering he was experiencing following childhood abuse and a failed sex-change operation.

There are other horror stories of this sort, and there will be more. Of course, suicide has long been the response of a minority to depression. But the idea that people who are not on the verge of death should be killed off by a medical practitioner because they are extremely unhappy is appalling.

Lord Falconer says there are all sorts of safeguards in his Bill, but the experience of Belgium suggests that once the precedent

of medical execution has been accepted, it is very difficult to draw a line in the sand.

And, of course, there is a danger that grasping relatives could put pressure on an elderly patient to opt for death and that a trigger-happy doctor with a lethal syringe might be easily summoned.

Interestingly, in The Sun poll that I mentioned, only 38 per cent of respondents said they would assist a relative to die, though 69 per cent said they would like to be helped on their way. There are fewer people who are prepared to help others to die than want to be helped to die themselves.

If any of us found ourselves in the predicament of Hayley Cropper, we might want to spare ourselves the final days of agony by taking a lethal draught, though I suggest that in most cases such a course of action would be traumatising to surviving family members.

Life, though, is usually not so straightforward as Coronation Street would have it be. The issue the soap opera ducks is: what would happen if Hayley were unable to kill herself?

Humans are flawed creatures. We can be incompetent, jealous and wanton. That is why I believe that those who treasure the sanctity of life, whether they are religious or not, should beware of institutionalised killing, which euphemistically calls itself 'assisted dying'.