

By **Daniel Martin**  
and **Simon Caldwell**

**BELGIUM** last night became the first country in the world to allow the mercy killing of young children.

Until yesterday, the youngest age at which euthanasia was permitted anywhere was 12 - in the Netherlands.

But last night Belgian MPs went much further. They voted overwhelmingly to scrap age limits altogether, meaning that terminally-ill children - no matter how young they are - will be able to legally end their lives with the help of a doctor.

The new law is hedged with restrictions in an effort to ensure that the scheme cannot be abused. They

### 'It puts us on a slippery slope'

include the stipulation that the parents have to agree to the killing.

But opponents, including religious leaders, opposition MPs and many paediatricians, say there is no way to stop the child euthanasia law being abused, and no way to ensure that a child had made a lucid decision to die.

One man in the public gallery shouted 'murderers' in French when the vote was announced.

Last night Dignity in Dying, the leading campaigners in the UK for assisted suicide, dismissed fears that the mercy killing of children could come to Britain.

'We campaign for a change in the law to allow the choice of assisted dying to terminally ill, mentally competent adults...not the euthanasia laws practised in the Benelux countries,' a spokesman said. 'The law change being debated in Belgium

# Euthanasia for children is legalised in Belgium

goes well beyond what Dignity in Dying advocate.'

But Elspeth Chowdharay-Best of euthanasia opponents Alert, said the experience of Belgium shows that any legalisation of assisted suicide was the thin end of the wedge. 'We are often accused of hysteria when we warn the public that attempts in this country to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia will put us on a slippery slope to unspeakable horrors,' she said.

'Yet in Belgium, which legalised euthanasia in 2003, we have seen the killings of patients who have not requested it and we have seen it extended to the disabled, the depressed, to prisoners and now we will see it extended to children. This is an appalling development.'

Euthanasia is only allowed in over-18s in Belgium at present. People must be terminally ill and close to death, with very little chance that medicine can help them.

In extending the law to children, extra restrictions have been imposed. Parents must give their consent, and a psychi-

### 'Unspeakable horror'

atrist must stipulate the child is conscious of their decision - a 'state of discernment'.

Polls show the public is 75 per cent in favour of the legislation. But during debates in the Belgian Chamber of Representatives, opponents said the law was rushed and lacking medical rationale.

Sonja Becq, an MP for the Christian Democrats, said modern science is capable of relieving pain in very sick children until their illnesses runs their natural course. The MP said the proposal was full of holes, asking: 'Can you tell me what a "state of discernment" means?'

And Christian Brotcorne, head of a French-speaking centrist group in parliament, asked: 'What will happen if the parents disagree with each other?' Daniel Bacquelaîne, of the centrist Reform Movement, tried to





Furious: Activists against the new law protest in Brussels

## THE COUNTRY'S NEW RULES ... AND THE GREY AREAS

*These criteria must be met before euthanasia of a minor would be legal:*

- The child must be conscious of their decision and understand the meaning of euthanasia;
- The child must have made multiple requests to die;
- The request must be approved by the child's parents and medical team;
- Their illness must be terminal;
- They should be in the final stages of their illness; and
- They must be in great pain, with no treatment available to alleviate it.

*Opponents say there are many grey areas in the legislation.*

- What are the 'final stages' of a terminal illness? Is it a few weeks or a few years? The law does not set any length of time.
- Parents have to agree to a child's decision, but what happens if they are divorced or they disagree? What is the status of step-parents?
- How can anyone be sure whether the child understands euthanasia and whether they have come to the decision on their own? Parents, unable to bear the suffering of their child, could put pressure on them.

assuage their fears. 'Where there is the smallest doubt about the discernment of the child, the question of euthanasia will not be posed,' he said.

Philippe Mahoux, a Socialist and the Bill's main sponsor, said: 'What we are giving them is the possibility to die with dignity, without suffering, without intolerable pain.'

The measure was approved by 86 votes to 44 by the Chamber of Representatives. It has been backed by the upper house and all that is needed for it to become legal is the

signature of King Philippe, normally a formality.

■ The architect of Holland's pioneering euthanasia law has been murdered in a garage at her home. Dr Els Borst, 81, health minister from 1994 to 2002, was probably attacked by a burglar.

Four years ago, she said she regretted pushing through the euthanasia law in 2001 because of the damage it had done to the hospice movement in Holland.

The body of the former hospital doctor was discovered by a friend at her home in Bilthoven.