

Assisted dying Bill 'will put pressure on the elderly and disabled to end their life'

By John Bingham, Social Affairs Editor

VULNERABLE disabled and elderly people will be treated as if their life is worth less than anybody else's if assisted suicide is legalised, a group of prominent disability campaigners argues today.

Baroness Grey-Thompson – the 11-times Paralympic gold medallist – and a group of peers and charity campaigners said a move to relax Britain's euthanasia laws could put frail Britons under pressure to end their life.

Their comments, in a letter to *The Daily Telegraph*, come as a Bill to legalise so-called "assisted dying" tabled by Lord Falconer, the former Lord Chancellor, begins its passage through Parliament.

The Bill, due to be introduced in the Lords today, would allow doctors to prescribe a lethal dose of drugs to terminally ill patients deemed to have less than six months to live. It states doctors must be satisfied the patient has both the mental capacity to decide and a "clear and settled intention" to end his or her life.

But in a separate intervention, one of Britain's top psychiatrists argues today that, because it is difficult to determine a person's state of mind, there are "no possible safeguards" which could adequately protect the vulnerable. Baroness Hollins, a former president of both the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Psychiatrists, said the plan would amount not only to a major change in the law but to the "principles that underpin medical practice" itself.

Under the 1961 Suicide Act, it is a crime carrying up to 14 years in prison to help someone to take his or her own life. But prosecution guidelines now make clear that those who enable loved ones to travel abroad, such as to Switzerland, to end their life are likely to escape charges.

Supporters of Lord Falconer say a

change in the law is urgently needed to end uncertainty and enable people to die in dignity at a time and place of their choosing. But opponents claim that safeguards written into the Bill could be swept away in practice.

The letter argues that the Bill would reinforce inequality towards disabled and older people. It asks: "Why is it that when people who are not disabled want to commit suicide, we try to talk them out of it, but when a disabled person wants to, we focus on how to make that possible?"

The Bill was published last year but did not go through the parliamentary process



Baroness Grey-Thompson opposes the Bill which is due to be introduced to the Lords today

for timetabling reasons. After being introduced in the Lords it is expected to have its first full debate before the summer recess. If it clears the Lords it would then pass to the Commons where MPs say support has grown in recent years.

In an article on telegraph.co.uk, Baroness Hollins asks: "How robust is the idea of a settled intent? People do change their mind.

"This happened to a friend dying of motor neurone disease who told me, six months before his death, that he would gladly take a lethal prescribed drug if it was available. Much closer to his death he confided that he had so valued the closeness and closure that this time had brought him. He died gently and peacefully having learnt to let go."

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