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# Dangerous, abusive, mistaken:

## what Welby thinks of

## assisted suicide

David Sanderson

Legalising assisted suicide would leave a "sword of Damocles" hanging over the heads of elderly people, the Archbishop of Canterbury has said.

The Most Rev Justin Welby said that the opinions of supporters of the Assisted Dying Bill, which is working its way through parliament, were "mistaken and dangerous", adding that their arguments would not pass muster in a GCSE exam.

The archbishop, in his first intervention in the assisted suicide debate, has written about his family's traumatic decision to agree to end medical treatment for his dying baby daughter, adding however that the desire to end an individual's suffering should not "blind us to the wider needs of others".

Writing before the second reading in the Lords of Lord Falconer of Thoroton's Assisted Dying Bill, the archbishop said that if the bill was enacted many elderly people would "be put under pressure to end their lives if

assisted suicide were permitted by law" by friends and relatives with financial gain as their motive.

"Abuse, coercion and intimidation can be slow instruments in the hands of the unscrupulous, creating pressure on vulnerable people who are encouraged to 'do the decent thing,'" he writes in *The Times* today.

"Even where such pressure is not overt, the very presence of a law that permits assisted suicide on the terms proposed by Lord Falconer is bound to lead to sensitive individuals feeling that they ought to stop 'being a burden to others'.

"What sort of society would we be creating if we were to allow this sword of Damocles to hang over the head of every vulnerable, terminally-ill person in the country?"

Lord Falconer, the former Lord Chancellor, has said he believes that a majority of peers now support a change in the law to allow doctors to help the terminally ill end their lives. If it passes the Lords and reaches the Commons,

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MPs of most parties are expected to be given a free vote.

Lord Falconer's bill would allow terminally-ill patients with a "settled intention" to end their lives to have doctors prescribe them lethal doses of drugs. Two doctors would have to sign off the fatal dose.

At present, assisted suicide remains a criminal offence punishable by up to 14 years in jail, although guidelines issued by the director of public prosecutions in 2010 indicated that anyone acting with compassion on the will of a dying person was unlikely to face charges.

Archbishop Welby said that while the bill's supporters might be well-intentioned in believing that assisted suicide

was a "truly compassionate response" to terminal illness, their opinion "is both mistaken and dangerous".

His views are not shared by Lord Carey of Clifton, Archbishop of Canterbury from 1991 to 2002.

Lord Carey writes in the *Daily Mail* today that he now supports the right to die, adding that it would not be "anti-Christian" to change the law on assisted dying. "In strictly observing the sanctity of life, the Church could now actually be sanctioning anguish and pain, the very opposite of the Christian message of hope," he writes.

Archbishop Welby, who has previously said how the death of Johanna, his seven-month-old daughter, in May 1983 after a car crash, had made "the presence of God... more clearly present than at any time in my life", cited her death in his arguments against Lord Falconer's bill. He said that while it was understandable that "we would wish to alleviate someone's suffering in the name of compassion, the compassion should be extended to everyone".