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Lord Carey's judgment on assisted dying is un-Christian



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I yield to no one in my respect for Lord Carey and for the good things he has said and done, but I am simply amazed at his arguments (or lack of them) in support of Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill for the terminally ill. Lord Carey says that he has changed his mind after encountering the cases of Tony Nicklinson and Paul Lamb, who had severe paralysis but were not terminally ill. In what way do these cases support a Bill specifically for those with a life expectancy of six months or less?

The majority of those who are terminally ill want what Dr Peter Saunders, of the Christian Medical Fellowship, calls "assisted living" rather than "assisted dying". This is what the Christian-inspired hospice movement seeks to do, enabling those nearing the end of their lives to prepare for a peaceful and good death. The fact that good hospice care is based on a postcode lottery is what should shame us, rather than not having our own answer to Dignitas in Switzerland.

Instead of conceiving expensive ways of getting rid of those at their most vulnerable, I strongly believe we should be making sure that good hospice care is evenly available across the length and breadth of the country.

Rightly, Lord Carey has pointed out that where assisted dying (by any name) has been permitted, it has led to a widening of the provision beyond the terminally ill to those who are disabled, depressed or just tired of life. He says that it would be "outrageous" if assisted dying were to be extended to such categories in this country. But the cases on which he relies show precisely how the arguments will not remain for the terminally ill alone, but will be extended to others.

For these and other reasons, nearly the whole of the medical profession, experts in palliative care and disability groups are united in their opposition to this Bill.

There is no exact science

that identifies who is dying and when they are going to die. People who have been given six months, or less, to live sometimes survive for years. Who will be responsible for premature deaths if Falconer's Bill becomes law?

And let's not forget Christian teaching on the value of the human person, the duty of care and the prohibition on killing, especially the elderly. It is true, of course, that "thou shalt not kill" does not mean officiously keeping people alive at all costs. Patients can refuse treatment and doctors can withdraw it if it is ineffective, unduly intrusive or unbearably painful. But the all-important word in these cases is "intention". What is intended: relief of pain, or the death of a patient?

We also have to take account not just of hard cases but the vast majority of the disabled, the elderly and the vulnerable. They cannot be left at the mercy of an ever-widening definition of those thought eligible to die, as dictated by those who manipulate public opinion. We need to uphold the value of a human life, work to relieve suffering and honour the medical profession's role in preserving life, not destroying it.

I continue to call Lord Carey a friend and I hope he will continue to see me as a friend too, but for the sake of the weakest in our society, we cannot allow the announcement of his support for Lord Falconer's Bill to go unchallenged.

There is talk of setting up a Royal Commission to consider this whole matter. This could be a positive development as it would allow all sides to contribute. Such a commission must be genuinely representative of expert opinion in this area – and it will have to take account of what the Judeo-Christian tradition teaches about the human person. It is on this that our values are based. Oh that Lord Carey had attended to it more thoroughly than he has.