

Four in five doctors would not help patients to end their lives

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Doctors have hardened their opposition to assisted dying, according to a poll which suggests that fewer than one in five would be willing to help patients end their lives.

Opponents of assisted dying said this would present serious practical problems if the law was changed, raising the prospect that a few willing doctors would have to move around the country in what some have termed “death squads”.

However, supporters of Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill, being considered by parliament, said the survey suggested an element of confusion among doctors, as a majority said they were sympathetic to the idea of letting terminally ill patients in unbearable pain end their lives with help.

They insisted that relatively few doctors would be needed to make the law work and others would come around eventually.

The poll by the Medix consultancy found that 58 per cent of doctors questioned said they were opposed to legalising assisted suicide. This is a jump of 13 points from the last time they asked the same question a decade ago. Only 29 per cent supported a change in the law, down five points from 2004, with many expressing unease with the idea of doctors ending life deliberately. All big medical associations oppose reform.

“Many doctors have first-hand expe-

rience of caring for dying patients and believe that rather than deliberately ending a patient's life, we should instead be focusing on building the very best of palliative care for those in distress,” said Tony Calland, the chairman of the British Medical Association's ethics committee.

“There have always been strongly held views on assisted dying as this is a complex, emotive issue centred upon vulnerable patients nearing the end of their lives. As reflected in this poll, doctors have repeatedly expressed their opposition to assisted dying.”

Only 19 per cent they would be prepared to offer the service if the law was changed, with 56 per cent refusing and the rest unsure, the poll suggested.

Alistair Thompson, a spokesman for Care not Killing said: “Doctors know that this is not needed, will take money away from palliative care, and it will damage the relationship they have with their patients. For all these factors doctors in increasing numbers have hardened their opposition... The fact that so few doctors want to have any part in this macabre change in the law shows it is unworkable and would lead to the slippery slope we have seen in other countries.”

Yet the poll also found that, when asked in what circumstances doctor-assisted euthanasia should be permitted, 54 per cent said in cases of “terminal illness with uncontrollable physical suffering”, a similar number to 2004.

Sarah Wootton, the chief executive of Dignity in Dying, said that was all Lord Falconer proposed. “There appears to be significant support amongst doctors for legislation strictly limited to assisted dying for terminally ill people,” she said. “Extrapolating from Oregon's Death with Dignity Act on which Lord Falconer's Bill builds, just over 1,300 terminally ill patients would have an assisted death each year in England and Wales. If one in five doctors was willing to assist that would provide around 7,000 registered GPs willing, within the legal safeguards, to help a patient.”

She said there was a problem with the current law, as the survey suggested that 29 per cent of doctors had been asked by a patient to end their life and 37 per cent believed colleagues were helping people to commit suicide.

Professor Raymond Tallis, the chairman of Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying said this was evidence of “an ethical and legal fudge”, with doctors claiming they were giving drugs to relieve suffering even when they knew patients would die. “To me that's unsatisfactory. It's not really honest. We should be upfront with patients rather than things having to be done under the blankets,” he said.

“Most doctors would say their primary aim is to save lives but sometimes prolonging life means you should think about the secondary aim which is to reduce suffering. I think it's within the spirit of all our medical oaths.”