

Hawking: I'd rather end my life than be a burden

Rosemary Bennett

Stephen Hawking would consider seeking assistance to end his own life if he felt that he had nothing more to contribute to the world and was merely a burden.

The celebrated physicist, who has motor neurone disease, used to oppose assisted suicide, but he changed his mind last year, saying that it was the "ultimate indignity" to keep someone alive against their wishes.

He said that he would consider it if he was in great pain.

In an interview with Dara Ó Briain, the comedian and presenter, for a new BBC programme, Professor Hawking disclosed he suffered bouts of loneliness because people can be afraid to talk to him or let him answer.

"To keep someone alive against their wishes is the ultimate indignity. I would consider assisted suicide only if I were in great pain or felt I had nothing more to contribute but was just a burden to those around me," he said.

However, he added that he still had a lot to live for. "I am damned if I'm going to die before I have unravelled more of the universe," he said.

He is not in pain, he

said, but suffers occasional discomfort because he cannot adjust his own position. Ó Briain, who has a degree in theoretical physics, praised Hawking for his "impressively honest answers, even to the most direct questions".

He asked the 73-year-old physicist, who communicates through a speech synthesiser, whether he ever found life lonely. "At times I get very lonely because people are afraid to talk to me or don't wait for me to write a response," said Hawking, who is testing even more sophisticated communication technology. "I'm shy and tired at times. I find it difficult to talk to people I don't know."

Hawking was 21 when he was given two years to live. He has been in a wheelchair since the 1960s.

It is illegal to help someone to end their own life, but the police and courts interpret the law liberally. No one who has helped a loved one go to the Dignitas clinic in Zurich to die has been prosecuted.

Lord Falconer, the former lord chancellor, has tabled a new bill in the Lords to change the law to allow doctors to prescribe lethal doses of medication for patients who are terminally ill and have six months or less to live.

Stephen Hawking changed his view on assisted suicide



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