

Daily Telegraph June 20th 2015

Dutch doctors say euthanasia should be open to under-12s

By Justin Huggler

DOCTORS in the Netherlands have called for terminally ill children to be given the right to die.

The Netherlands is one of few countries in the world where euthanasia is permitted for terminally ill patients.

But the Dutch Paediatric Association said that existing laws do not go far enough and called for an age limit to be scrapped. Under current laws, only those aged 12 and over can ask to die. "We feel that an arbitrary age limit such as 12 should be changed," said Eduard Verhagen, professor of paediatrics at Groningen University, and a member of the association's ethics committee.

"Each child's ability to ask to die should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis."

Euthanasia in the Netherlands is subject to strict controls. Doctors can claim immunity from prosecution only if a series of stringent conditions are fulfilled. The patient's suffering must be unbearable, with no prospect of improvement, and they must persistently ask to die over a course of time. Under the current rules, children aged between 12 and 16 must also have parental approval, while euthanasia is banned for those under 12.

"If a child under 12 satisfies the same conditions, paediatricians are currently powerless. It's time to address this problem," said Prof Verhagen.

Five children have been euthanised in the Netherlands since it became legal in 2002, Prof Verhagen said. One was 12 years old, while the other four were aged between 16 and 17. A change in the law would bring the Netherlands into line with Belgium, which last year became the first country to allow euthanasia for young children. Children there can ask to die if they are "in a hopeless medical situation of constant and unbearable suffering that cannot be eased and which will cause death in the short-term".

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