

Police force daughters to scrap party for Dignitas

Frances Gibb Legal Editor

A daughter trying to raise money to pay for her terminally ill mother to commit suicide at a Swiss clinic has cancelled the campaign because she is at risk of being prosecuted.

Tara O'Reilly, from Llanelli, and her sister Rose Baker, from near Swansea, had hoped to raise £8,000 to send 59-year-old Jackie Baker, who has motor neurone disease, to Dignitas. They say that her condition has deteriorated and that she has begged them to ensure that she dies with dignity.

They had arranged a fundraising evening with a drag artist and playboy waiters, but Mrs O'Reilly has been visited by police at the salon where she is a hairdresser and warned that she and her sister may face charges.

It is illegal to encourage or assist someone trying to take their own life, a crime punishable by up to 14 years in jail. Raising money could be regarded as encouraging or assisting, although whether or not a prosecution would be brought would be down to the discretion of prosecutors and the guidelines on assisted suicide.

The Director of Public Prosecutions has indicated that it is unlikely that a prosecution would be brought in certain circumstances, and people helping relatives to travel to Dignitas have not been charged.

The guidelines say that factors tending in favour of not prosecuting include when someone has tried to dissuade a person from going and their help was only "reluctant encouragement or assistance". Actively raising money might be regarded as more than "reluctant assistance".

Mrs O'Reilly said: "It is inhumane that people should have to suffer in the way that my mother may have to now. She is being stripped of her dignity bit by bit. I'm so upset — the thought of seeing my mum die without her dignity makes me feel sick."

Mrs Baker, 59, of Morriston, Swansea, received her diagnosis in February. Sufferers have a life expectancy of between six months and five years.

Her case comes ahead of fresh and fierce debate on the issue of assisted dying. The Assisted Dying Bill is going through parliament and the draft legislation is due to be debated in the Commons on September 11. If passed as it stands, it would allow doctors to prescribe a lethal dose to terminally ill patients with six months or less to live.

The campaign group Dignity In Dying said that change was desperately needed. "Terminally ill people should be able to choose the manner and time of their death," said a spokesman.

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