

News

Assisted dying would just raise pressure on elderly to end lives, say doctors

By **Sarah Knapton** SCIENCE EDITOR

ELDERLY people are already being put under pressure to end their own lives and legalising assisted dying would make the situation worse, a group of physicians has warned.

Nearly 80 doctors across the country have written an open letter to MPs warning that many elderly and disabled people already feel pressured to end their own lives because they think they are a burden to relatives.

The House of Commons is due to debate next month whether to overturn the ban on assisted suicide.

"We believe such proposals devalue the most vulnerable in society," the doctors write in a letter published in *The Daily Telegraph*.

"We regularly come across patients who feel a burden to their relatives and to society due to their particular health and social care needs. They are under pressure from within to remove themselves as a burden on their hard-pressed families. With an ageing population

and with many families today unable to devote themselves to full-time care of a seriously ill relative, situations like this are not uncommon."

The doctors also warned that some families would use a change in the law to exert pressure on relatives.

"We do from time to time come across cases where there are signs of subtle pressures being exerted," they argue. "These are difficult to prove but they can be very real, and we fear that, if Parliament were to legalise assisted suicide for terminally ill people, they would be given free rein."

Assisted suicide is a criminal offence in England and Wales, technically punishable by up to 14 years in prison. But polling has consistently suggested high levels of public support for it.

The Assisted Dying Bill was brought before the House of Lords by Lord Falconer, but it ran out of time before the general election.

However, the Labour MP Rob Marris has introduced a fresh Bill using the draft regulations, and it is expected to

be debated in the House of Commons on Sept 11.

The Bill would allow patients to end their lives if they have no more than six months to live and had demonstrated a "clear and settled intention".

Two doctors would have to sign off the request and it is likely that a High Court judge would make the final decision.

Although MPs discussed assisted dying in a backbench committee debate on the Director of Public Prosecution's guidelines in 2012, it will be the first time in almost 20 years that the Commons has taken a vote on the topic.

Earlier this month, an alliance of bishops, priests and rabbis broke ranks with the religious establishment to voice support for plans to change the law in a letter to this newspaper.

They argued that helping terminally ill people to commit suicide should be viewed as enabling them to "gracefully hand back" their lives to God.

Letters: Page 17