

Laws must change to give people right to die

Former chief prosecutor calls for end to injustice

Frances Gibb Legal Editor

The law must be changed so that people can be helped to take their own lives without having to "traipse off to Switzerland", a former director of public prosecutions has said.

Sir Keir Starmer was responsible for drawing up guidelines that spelt out how people who acted with compassion might avoid prosecution for assisting a suicide.

He is now convinced that it is time for a new law to save dozens of Britons every year from making their way to the Zurich clinics of Dignitas to end their lives.

Sir Keir, who became Labour MP for Holborn and St Pancras this year, has always declined to give his view of the law, but he has decided to go public before the Assisted Dying Bill returns to parliament next month.

"The law needs to be changed," he told *The Times*. "The important thing is to have safeguards."

Crown Prosecution Service guidelines "simply don't deal with the problem of people wanting to end their lives in this country, medically assisted, rather than traipse off to Switzerland", he said. "The present guidelines have in-built limitations, which mean that there can be injustice in a number of cases."

One of the key problems was that doctors were not allowed to help, which

meant that chronically ill people might have to rely upon friends or relatives to help them to die.

Since he issued draft guidelines in 2009, the CPS has received files on assisted suicides in 110 cases — 70 were not proceeded with by prosecutors and 25 were withdrawn by police. The others are still being considered or have been referred for prosecution. Only one, in 2013, was prosecuted. Assisted suicide is punishable by up to 14 years in jail.

"In my time as DPP, there was only one prosecution — of someone who provided petrol and a lighter to a vulnerable man said to have suicidal intent, who subsequently suffered severe burns as a result," Sir Keir said.

An analysis from the Dignity in Dying campaign group shows that 166 Britons went to Dignitas to take their lives in the six years to last December. Assisted suicide and euthanasia are illegal in every country in Europe apart from Belgium, Luxembourg, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

Sir Keir believes that the law does not "strike the right balance" between allowing those with a "voluntary, clear, settled and informed wish to die to be assisted by someone acting out of compassion" and protecting those who are vulnerable to being pressurised to take their lives.

Concerns over the vulnerable are

Continued from page 1

overstated, he believes. "In almost none of the 80 or so cases I reviewed when DPP was this an issue." Sir Keir asked: "Do we keep something there to protect the vulnerable and ignore the plight of those actively committing suicide or being assisted to attempt suicide, or move to a different position where there are strong safeguards?"

His intervention comes amid concern that the law is struggling to cope with cases where people want to die but cannot physically take their own lives. This month Bob Cole, 68, who was terminally ill, said that he would take his life at Dignitas. He fulfilled his wish the same day, 18 months after watching his wife, Ann Hall, do the same.

Lorraine Grant and David Brown, who were together for 40 years, also killed themselves this month in a five-star hotel after making a suicide pact. Ms Grant, 57, who had terminal bladder cancer, had been given six months to

Times August 29th 2015