

Making assisted dying legal risks 'opening a can of worms' for hospices

By **John Bingham**

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LEGALISING assisted dying could cast the future of the UK's world-leading hospice movement into serious doubt, a hospice chief has said.

Plans to be considered by MPs tomorrow could open a "can of worms" for organisations caring for the terminally ill, said Peter Holliday, deputy chairman of the charity Hospice UK and chief executive of St Giles Hospice in Lichfield, Staffs.

The Assisted Dying Bill, tabled by Rob Marris MP, contains a conscience clause ensuring doctors and nurses would not be forced to be involved, but it would still leave organisations such as hospices in a potentially impossible situation, Mr Holliday argued.

Any change in the law requiring the NHS to offer assisted dying to those who request it could, he said, have a serious knock-on effect on public funding for hospices if they refused to participate, forcing some to close or cut

back services. Demand from the public once assisted dying was legalised could also place hospices under pressure to offer it, something many would feel went against their founding ethos of providing the best palliative care before a natural death, he argued.

Hospices which refused to help patients end their lives may have to send the terminally ill elsewhere, he said.

Under the Bill, terminally ill patients judged to have no more than six months to live would be allowed to be given a lethal dose of drugs to end their life on the authority of two doctors. The High Court would also have to be satisfied that the patient had demonstrated a "voluntary, clear, settled and informed wish", was of sound mind and over 18.

Mr Holliday, who is also an ordained priest, set out his objections on the Church of England website. He said that his own hospice gets just over two thirds of its funding from the public and the remainder from the NHS.

"The National Health Service requires us, in our contracts, to comply

with the requirements of the NHS," he said. "If the NHS is going to be required to offer assisted dying there is of course the possibility that it would require us or an organisation contracting with the NHS also to offer assisted dying.

"If there is no possibility within the final legislation for hospices to opt out of being a part of what is effectively assisted suicide, then there is nervousness about where our funding might be found in the future."

He said some hospices might feel they had to allow assisted suicide on their premises in order to safeguard vital funding. "Then would we find ourselves with certain institutions where people effectively had to go for assisted dying?" he asked. "It just opens up a can of worms and we have to react to what the law of the land is at the time."

The Bill could, he added, create chaos within hospices because they tend to attract staff with a strong belief in the ideals of preserving life. He said the "potential frictions within the staff team would be enormous".