

Assisted dying bill 'puts elderly at risk'

Frances Gibb Legal Editor

Elderly, ill and vulnerable people will be put in significantly more danger under proposed changes in the law to allow assisted suicide, the former president of the High Court's family division has said.

Baroness Butler-Sloss came out strongly against legislation to go before MPs this week, warning that proposed safeguards in the Assisted Dying Bill will provide no protection to the vulnerable.

Referral of each case to a High Court judge "simply will not remedy the weaknesses in these safeguards," she wrote in a letter to *The Times*, because judges were not well placed "to discern whether subtle

coercion or pressure has been applied" to encourage a vulnerable person to end his or her life.

"My experience of presiding over the family division of the High Court showed me again and again how subtle and calculated the pressure, coercion and even control exerted on a vulnerable individual can be," Lady Butler-Sloss wrote. "The safeguards provide no real protection to the truly vulnerable and they will fall apart if this bill becomes law."

"This bill would place many elderly, ill and vulnerable people in significantly more danger," she said.

She also expressed concern over the ability of doctors to judge whether abuse



Baroness Butler-Sloss says safeguards will fall apart

or coercion had taken place and pointed out that the College of General Practitioners was opposing a change in the law.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Rev Justin Welby, warned with other religious leaders last week that the UK would cross a "legal and ethical Rubicon" if parliament voted on Friday to allow terminally ill patients help to end their lives.

Lord Carlile of Berriew, QC, the co-chairman of Living and Dying Well, a group opposed to assisted suicide, also warned that "creating an advanced licensing system for assisted suicide" could lead to 1,500 more suicides a year.

Sir Keir Starmer, QC, the former director of public prosecutions and now a Labour MP, will outline the case for reform at a seminar in Westminster today.

Sir Keir, who helped to devise the existing prosecuting guidelines, writes in an article for *The Times* that the present law can no longer be justified. People who have made a "voluntary, clear, settled and informed decision" to end their lives can only obtain "amateur help of their nearest and dearest" and not professional medical assistance unless they "traipse off to Dignitas in Switzerland", he says. "That is an injustice which we should not tolerate any longer."

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