

Letters to the Editor

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Judges' dilemma over assisted dying

Sir, The attempted safeguards contained in the Assisted Dying Bill are utterly inadequate and will not protect vulnerable individuals. I have serious concerns that the bill, if passed, presents significant public safety risks. Indeed, I remain unconvinced that sufficiently strong and effective safeguards can be designed to enable this kind of legislation to be fit for purpose.

The College of General Practitioners oppose a change in the law, and the vast majority of GPs say that they would not want to be involved with an assisted suicide, so it is highly unlikely that a GP could be found who knew the patient, let alone a second doctor who would definitely be independent of the first. If that is the case, then doctors are wholly ill-equipped to judge whether coercion or abuse has really taken place.

I am also deeply concerned that the referral of each case to a High Court judge, who will then be required to make a decision within two weeks, or sometimes just six days, simply will not remedy the weaknesses in these safeguards. The judge will not be well placed to discern whether subtle coercion or pressure has been applied, especially in the very limited timescale that the bill demands.

In my opinion, this bill would place many elderly, ill and vulnerable people in significantly more danger than the current law. 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. The safeguards provide no real protection to the truly vulnerable and they will fall apart if this bill becomes law.

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