

Sunday Times 12th March 16

THE new head of Britain's leading assisted dying organisation has praised and thanked "thousands of doctors" for helping their patients to die every year.

In her first interview since being appointed chairwoman of Dignity in Dying, Baroness Meacher said: "We know that thousands of doctors do help patients who are terminally ill and who are [mentally] capacious and who want to die. Thousands of doctors every year do help those patients to die.

"They have sufficient compassion that they cannot bear to see their patients continue to suffer unbearably and so they are prepared to risk their own freedom to help their patients and I would say thank you to every one of those doctors."

A study by Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, published in 2009, estimated that around 1,000 doctors illegally helped their patients to commit suicide every year. Campaigners say the true extent of the practice is unknown as doctors cannot be

worth depriving herself of water tells you how much she wanted to die."

About 30 years ago Meacher's aunt also committed suicide. The aunt, aged about 80, was suffering from advanced liver cancer.

When "she could no longer cope with the mixture of the cancer symptoms and the side effects of medication" she ended her life with an overdose "all on her own, in the middle of the night".

"It struck me then that it is very sad that we as a community require that people die on their own," said Meacher.

"She couldn't have her husband with her because he would have then been open to prosecution for assisting or in some way colluding. My aunt had to do it without telling him.

"We saw her in those later stages of her cancer and had no idea what she was planning."

Meacher recalled how her mother, who died at 92, endured weeks of what she believes to have been unnecessary suffering at the end of her life.

She said: "My mother had a horrible death. Any amount of palliative care would not have alleviated her situation. In my view, she would have been much better off had she been able to avoid the last two weeks.

"All these people would have benefited hugely from the law we would want to bring in."

Meacher, who has four children aged between 44 and 50, added: "We didn't want our mother to die in that way and my main motivation in wanting to help this campaign is that I do not wish my children to die in any of these ways."

A Populus poll for Dignity in Dying last year found 82% support for Lord Falconer's Assisted Dying Bill, which proposed giving terminally ill, mentally competent people the legal option of assistance to die. The Bill ran out of parliamentary time, and MPs later rejected similar proposals.

Meacher realises she has to persuade the British Medical Association (BMA), the doctors' union, to drop its opposition to assisted dying if she is to persuade politicians to vote for the laws.

She says the medical profession must recognise that patients want doctor assisted dying to be made legal.

A BMA spokeswoman said: "The issue of assisted dying has been regularly debated by the BMA at its annual policy-forming conference, with calls for a change in position persistently rejected."

She added that BMA members would have a chance to vote again on the issue at its conference later this month.

If you are affected by any of the issues raised in this article, call the Samaritans on 08457 909 990 or visit samaritans.org



Meacher: 'requiring people to die on their own is very sad'

open about their actions.

In addition, thousands of doctors give large doses of medication, such as morphine, to keep their patients comfortable in the knowledge this will hasten their death. This practice is legal.

Meacher, a cross-bench peer, said she would travel to Switzerland for an assisted death if she were terminally ill.

"I think I would, if necessary, go to Switzerland. I don't say that with any relish at all. I think to have to get on a plane to take your own life in a strange place feels inhuman to me," she said.

Meacher revealed that the experiences of people close to her had motivated her to lead attempts to introduce assisted dying legislation in Britain.

About 18 months ago a close friend, who was in her mid-70s and terminally ill, took her own life by starving and dehydrating herself.

"She decided that she couldn't cope any longer with her life," said Meacher. "For her to have decided that it was

Thousands of doctors helping people die