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Rejecting euthanasia

THE 2009 report Baroness Meacher refers to in “Thousands of doctors helping people die” (News, last week) found that in the UK covert euthanasia or assisted suicide by doctors is very rare. It also observed that in contrast with those in other countries, British doctors are “particularly consultative and cautious about shortening life”. The law as it stands helps us to offer comfort and dignity to the dying without bringing their lives to an abrupt end, which is why the UK and Scottish parliaments decided recently not to change it for something less safe. The idea that doctors in this country are giving large doses of medication such as morphine “in the

knowledge this will hasten death” is mistaken. It confuses the provision of medication to relieve pain with deliberate administration of large overdoses to end life. Patients close to death may die while receiving painkillers but they do not die because of them. As chairwoman of a pressure group campaigning for assisted suicide, Meacher has the goal of persuading the BMA to drop its opposition. But the views and concerns of doctors – reflected in numerous polls – cannot be brushed aside on an issue that affects both them and their patients. We should be wary of unfounded claims and the needless fear they can generate in vulnerable patients and their families.

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