

Belgian minor is first to be granted right to assisted suicide

By David Chazan in Paris

A TERMINALLY ill minor has become the first to be helped to die by doctors in Belgium since age restrictions on euthanasia were lifted two years ago.

The patient, believed to be 17 years old, was described as "critically ill" but no further details were released. The national French-language broadcaster RTBF said the case occurred in a Flemish-speaking area of Belgium.

Belgium is the only country that allows children of all ages to choose euthanasia, provided that parental consent is granted. The Netherlands also permits underage patients to request a doctor-assisted death, but only if they are aged 12 or over.

Prof Wim Distelmans, the head of Belgium's Federal Control and Evaluation Committee on Euthanasia, issued a statement confirming that the first assisted death of a minor was reported to the committee by a doctor last week.

"Fortunately there are very few children who are considered [for euthanasia] but that does not mean we should refuse them the right to a dignified death," Mr Distelmans told the *Het Nieuwsblad* newspaper.

Belgium legalised euthanasia for adults in 2002. Under Belgian law, a child must be terminally ill, face "unbearable physical suffering" and make repeated requests to die before euthanasia can be carried out.

The procedure also requires a psychological evaluation of the patient's mental state. Suffering stemming from psychiatric problems is excluded.

Despite objections by religious leaders and some doctors, who questioned whether children should be allowed to make such a difficult choice, an opinion poll taken a few months before parliament voted for the change suggested that 75 per cent of Belgians supported euthanasia for minors.

The number of patients choosing to be euthanised in Belgium has risen more than eight-fold since the procedure was legalised, with 2,021 cases reported last year, according to the federal committee.

Euthanasia returned to the headlines last month when the Belgian paralympic athlete Marieke Vervoort announced the end of her sporting career.

The 37-year-old wheelchair racer lives with a highly painful degenerative spinal condition and received assisted suicide approval in her native Belgium in 2008.

Belgian media reported before the Games that she might take her life after Rio, but Vervoort rejected the reports. "I have my [euthanasia] papers in my hand, but I'm still enjoying every little moment," she told reporters.