

Disabled rights and the poll on assisted dying

Sir, As a disabled person and a lifelong campaigner for disabled people's rights, I strongly disagree with Baroness Grey-Thompson's assertion (Thunderer, Jan 23) that disabled people would somehow be made more vulnerable or marginalised if assisted dying were legalised as a choice for terminally ill people at the end of life. Such a change in the law is supported by an overwhelming majority of disabled people (86 per cent, according to a 2015 Populus poll, even more than the general public at 82 per cent), who like me understand that assisted dying is about allowing terminally ill people to die well, not about devaluing or ending the lives of people who may otherwise be helped. This strength of feeling signals to me that change can and will come to the UK, as it has done in American and Australian states and across Canada. It is vital that our doctors are fully engaged in this debate.

I therefore welcome the decision of the Royal College of Physicians to poll its members on this important issue. It shows pragmatism and is certainly not the "travesty" that

Lady Grey-Thompson claims it to be.
LORD LOW OF DALSTON
House of Lords

Sir, It is difficult to understand why those opposed to assisted dying such as Baroness Grey-Thompson are so dismayed that an organisation might take a neutral view on the subject. A neutral stance on such a divisive issue is a reasonable one to take, as it would allow the Royal College of Physicians to properly represent the range of opinions held by its members, not just a small section. Last time the RCP's members were polled on this issue more than 50 per cent were either neutral or in favour of a change in the law. Polling consistently shows that more than 80 per cent of people with disabilities support a more sensitive, safeguarded and compassionate assisted dying law for terminally ill adults. Principled objections are entirely valid, but the voices of the small number who shout loudest should not drown out the vast majority who disagree.
LORD FALCONER OF THOROTON, QC
House of Lords

Sir, The question is not whether assisting suicide is right or wrong but whether it should be a new duty for doctors. We are clear that there is a chasm between symptom control to relieve suffering and prescribing or administering drugs to kill. Palliative medicine is there to help people live as well as possible until they die. No service can relieve all suffering, because its roots often lie in a person's life, not their illness. Where we fall short we must learn and improve, not counter failures with a lethal solution.

If society wants death on demand it should own it and not place it at the door of medicine. Ending a life does not need a doctor. A profession's representative body must have a clear position on what might become a new duty, otherwise what is its purpose? Tragically, the Royal College of Physicians risks failing both medicine and the public with this muddle. As a fellow and former secretary of the RCP ethics committee, I am embarrassed.
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