

Let doctors help patients end suffering, argues GP

Katie Gibbons

One of Britain's most senior GPs has reversed his opinion on assisted dying and called for terminally ill patients to be allowed to end their lives legally at home.

Aneez Esmail — who was the medical adviser on the inquiry into the murders of Harold Shipman, the GP and serial killer — said that keeping the conversation about assisted dying “hidden” could lead to further atrocities.

Dr Esmail told *The Times*: “Part of good palliative care must recognise when nothing more can be done to relieve distress and suffering. We need to allow patients to say ‘I’m ready to die now, I’ve said my goodbyes, this is just too much for me now.’”

MPs are to debate the impact of the blanket ban on assisted dying tomorrow. The debate will be led by Nick Boles, who changed his own opinion after having cancer diagnosed, and is campaigning for legalisation.

Dr Esmail, a professor at the University of Manchester, was medical adviser to Dame Janet Smith, who led the Shipman inquiry between 2001 and 2005. Shipman, one of the most prolific serial killers in history, killed an estimated 250 patients, most of them elderly women, during 20 years as a GP. It is thought that in the early cases he “hastened” death to ease the suffering of terminally ill patients.

Dr Esmail said: “I was very much against assisted dying. The Shipman case exemplified what goes wrong when the power of a doctor is unchecked. But I now see that the safeguard is to have it all out in the open, for the conversation not to be hidden. When you don’t talk about it the doctors end up having a huge amount of power and are able to abuse that power. Shipman had power over life and death and he exercised it unchallenged.”

Last month the Royal College of GPs and the British Medical Association, which are both opposed to changing the law, voted in favour of surveying their members on the issue. The Royal College of Physicians has dropped its opposition in favour of neutrality.