

Widow cleared of

husband's 'mercy killing'

By Martin Evans
CRIME CORRESPONDENT

THE family of an 80-year-old widow cleared of the "mercy killing" of her terminally ill husband have called for a change in the law to allow assisted dying after she was forced to endure the "terrible" ordeal of a murder trial.

Mavis Eccleston was found not guilty of the murder and manslaughter of her cancer-stricken husband, Dennis, 81, after she gave him a lethal cocktail of prescription medicine.

The jury heard how Mrs Eccleston penned a 14-page suicide note, describ-

ing how the couple from the village of Huntingdon, in Staffordshire, were ending their lives because of "ill health and harassment".

They were both taken to hospital after being found unconscious by relatives on Feb 20 last year. But while Mrs Eccleston was resuscitated, her husband was not because he had a "Do Not Resuscitate" order.

Jurors were told how Mr Eccleston passed away while holding hands with his wife of almost 60 years in adjacent hospital beds, later that day.

Prosecutors had claimed the retired miner had been unaware he was taking



Mavis Eccleston was cleared of the murder and manslaughter of her husband Dennis

a potentially lethal overdose, claiming Mrs Eccleston made an alleged admission to mental health nurses.

But her family said the couple had been in full agreement to end Mr Eccleston's suffering and should not have been forced to do it in such a way that ended with her facing a murder charge.

Following a two week trial, Mrs Eccleston was cleared of murder and an alternative charge of manslaughter by a jury at Stafford Crown Court, who deliberated for just two hours.

Joy Munns, 54, one of the couple's three children, said: "Our family is grateful and relieved that the jury

could also recognise our mum's love for our dad.

"We do not believe this needed to happen. If there had been an assisted dying law here in the UK, our dad would have been able to have the choice to end his suffering, with medical support, and with his loved ones around him. We believe there must be a change in the law."

A source close to the family revealed that the couple had inquired about travelling to the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland but had been unable to afford it or face the journey.

Prosecutors had claimed that the

couple had not formed a "clear and common" agreement to end their own lives and alleged that Mrs Eccleston had admitted this.

But jurors were told Mr Eccleston had refused treatment for his terminal bowel cancer and had made it clear he wanted to die on his own terms.

Giving evidence, Mrs Eccleston said her husband had "more or less begged" for her help to end his life and had given her instructions how to do so.

She told the court he had kissed her hand in thanks before they both took medication and said "Goodnight darling" as she went to lie down on the sofa.