

TIMES 26 JUN 2020

# Assisted dying and the call for a public debate

Sir, Daniel Finkelstein ("We don't have to live with this way of dying", June 24, and letters, Jun 25) talks of an assisted dying law "with careful safeguards" and "following careful procedures and review". Yet the private members' bills that have come before parliament have not been like this. The present Assisted Dying Bill, like its predecessors, contains only ill-defined and broad criteria. There are no clearly defined safeguards and no minimum steps that a doctor would have to take to ensure compliance with the law. There is no provision for rigorous review of how "assisted dying" decisions are taken. Coercion could easily go undetected.

It is hardly surprising therefore that parliament has rejected such proposals by large majorities, most recently in 2015. What is surprising is that the campaigners for "assisted dying" do not seem to have learnt from this. They trundle out the same proposals year after year. This is a complex and sensitive matter. It is about balancing rights for some against protection for others. There is a need for clear and responsible analysis of the facts.

**Baroness O'Loan**  
House of Lords

Sir, I read Daniel Finkelstein's piece with mixed feelings. I felt sympathy for Ian Douglas and those close to him and their collective experiences. But I also recognised personal and professional dismay that it still seems to be expected that doctors will be responsible for helping patients to die.

I agree with campaigners for "assisted dying" that legislation is a matter for society to decide. But I do not agree that doctors should be expected to have a role in its provision other than to confirm diagnosis and clinical information as, in most of modern medicine, doctors are not qualified to make personal, family and social judgments that are inherent in such decisions. There are significant dangers of placing assisted suicide within medicine, not least that by doing so it is presented as a benevolent act and must be valid.

If "assisted dying" is a matter for society and not for doctors, it is society, through legal processes, that must take responsibility for it.

**Dr Iain Lawrie**

Consultant in palliative medicine,  
Manchester

Sir, I agree with Daniel Finkelstein. I hope that, in debating this subject,

undue weight will not be given in the future, as it has been in the past, to the views of the medical profession. If sufficient safeguards are in place, it is surely an act of pure compassion to assist in the death of someone who is terminally ill and wants to end their suffering, but no doctor who had a conscientious objection would be required to take part. That aside, the views of doctors are surely no more compelling than the views of any other group of people. The decision is one for us all. The fact that assisted dying would be brought about by medical means does not make it a medical issue.

**Richard Oerton**

Cannington, Somerset

Sir, I am heartened by Daniel Finkelstein's article. I have incurable cancer. Without a change in the law I am deprived of choice at the end of my life. I should be able to choose an assisted death so that in the last weeks of my life I can say: "Enough." I should be allowed to die before I have to endure weeks of protracted pain and deterioration. I will be dying anyway: I want the choice.

**Christie Arntsen**

Black Bourton, Oxon