

INTER-FAITH LEADERS FOR ASSISTED DYING

I BELIEVE IN THE SANCTITY OF LIFE, BUT NOT IN THE SANCTITY OF SUFFERING.

The long-held assumption that all religious people are against assisted dying is misleading. There are many who are both committed worshippers and believe strongly that assisted dying should be an option for those who so wish. For many years, this growing opinion among church-goers and members of other religious groups was not recognised because it had no voice by which it could be expressed.

Last year, however, it was given the means of being articulated fully and forcefully by religious leaders themselves. Leading ministers came together to form Inter-Faith leaders for Dignity in Dying (IFDiD): an inter-faith group of clergy who favour the aims of Dignity in Dying and who are openly calling for a law which would allow terminally ill, mentally competent adults the choice of assisted dying.

The alliance was established in November 2012 by Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Romain (of Maidenhead Synagogue) and now numbers 50 vicars and rabbis from different denominations (Anglican, Methodist, Unitarian Christians, along with Reform and Liberal Jews). Some had long been sympathetic to the legalisation of assisted dying. Others had been initially opposed to it, but changed their minds because of their pastoral experience where they saw terminally ill people suffering, who should have been allowed to pass away earlier as they had wished. Members of IFDiD believe it is a religious response to say that these people have a right to choose to die rather than carry on suffering.

Clergy in favour of assisted dying have been motivated not only by these concerns but also by theological reasons. Thus the Bible states that *'There is a time to be born and a time to die'* (Ecclesiastes 3.2) - but it does not stipulate who chooses that moment. Until now, it was assumed that it was God, but a modern understanding suggests that it could be the person him/herself if the circumstances warrant it. Moreover, the notion that, in some cases, life can be too painful to continue is reinforced by Ecclesiasticus 30.17 which declares that:

'Death is better than a miserable life, and eternal rest than chronic sickness'. The ability to avoid suffering is as much a religious goal as a human right.

"Christianity teaches that death is not the end, but the gateway to eternal life with God. Given such a hope, it is strange that any Christian would prefer unbearable suffering to a peaceful transition to the next life. One of the oldest Christian prayers asks God to 'Grant to life's day, a calm unclouded ending, An eve untouched by shadows of decay.' If it is legitimate to ask God for this, it follows that we should be able to ask a Christian doctor for assistance in enabling the prayer to be answered."

Paul Badham, author of *Is There a Christian Case for Assisted Dying?*

The members of IFDiD support the Assisted Dying Bill being tabled by Lord Falconer, holding that it coincides with both their pastoral experiences and theological understanding. They also regard the safeguards it proposes to protect vulnerable people as being an essential part of the legislation - without which they would not feel comfortable, but with which they feel confident that it is appropriate to endorse the Bill. They ask members of the House of Lords to support it too.

THE RELIGIOUS GENERAL PUBLIC SUPPORT ASSISTED DYING.

Findings from two recent large-scale YouGov polls and the 2010 British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) tell us that the majority of the general public with a religious faith support the legalisation of assistance to die.^{1,2,3} Findings also tell us that those who actively participate in a church or religious group, rather than simply identifying with a religion, support assisted dying.

- A YouGov survey commissioned by IFDiD found that 62% of people who identified as belonging to a religion supported the legalisation of assisted dying for terminally ill adults with mental capacity, whether they would want the choice for themselves or not. Only 18% were opposed.¹

- 78% of those who attended a place of worship once a month supported assisted dying. 59% of those who attended several times a month support assisted dying; this then slightly falls to half of those who attend once a week.²
- The BSA survey found that 71% of religious people agreed that a doctor should probably or definitely be allowed to end the life of a patient with a painful, incurable disease at the patient's request.³

This support is in contrast to the many religious leaders who claim to represent their views. However, the tide is shifting, as the Unitarian and Free Christian Churches voted to support a change in the law on assistance to die in April of this year. They are the first church to do so - and in doing so to reflect the majority support among assisted dying from religious people.

REFERENCES

- 1 YouGov survey, commissioned by IFDiD 2013
- 2 YouGov survey, commissioned for the Westminster Faith Debate 2013
- 3 McAndrew S (2010) Religious faith and contemporary attitudes, in Park A, Curtice J, Thomson K, Phillips A, Clery E, Butt S (eds) British Social Attitudes: 2009-2010. The 26th Report London, Sage: 87-113

CASE STUDY: DR LESLEY EVANS MRCP

I was diagnosed with multiple myeloma two years ago; a cancer which causes large holes to form in my bones, which are at risk of breaking and are extremely painful. This really is a horrible disease. Both my hips broke last December, for which I have two pins, and I also have a broken fibula. When I get toothache my condition prevents me from having any dentistry done because it may result in a collapsed jaw. I now dread having a toothache and lie in bed at night thinking of ways to end my suffering. I am likely to die in a matter of months.

I am now in and out of hospital, constantly undergoing operations. In 2011 I had a stem cell transplant and a very bad reaction to the chemotherapy - it was the worst thing I have ever been through.

The option of assisted dying would give me such comfort; to know that I didn't have to go on suffering forever, or have to take measures to end my life in another way. I simply cannot believe that anyone has the right to dictate to another person, who is dying, how or when they should die. I was a Consultant Physician in the care of the elderly and also started a small hospice; I have considerable

PROTECTING THE VULNERABLE

Alongside concern about those Britons who are suffering against their wishes at present at the end of life, we are also concerned that the current law forces some people to take drastic decisions without sufficient support from healthcare professionals. Cases of Britons travelling abroad to be assisted to die are well documented, but there are also Britons taking matters into their own hands domestically with and without the help of loved ones. A new law, as set out in the Assisted Dying Bill, would provide choice, control and comfort, but also better protection than currently exists.

The Assisted Dying Bill states that only those with a terminal illness (with a prognosis of six months or less) and mental capacity would be eligible. Dying people who wanted to request assistance would be assessed by two doctors and must have a clear and settled intention to end their own life which has been reached voluntarily, on an informed basis and without coercion or duress. They would be fully informed of the palliative, hospice and other care available and they could revoke their request at any time.

experience of caring for the dying and feel very strongly that the patient's body belongs to them and not the medical staff.

I have an incredibly strong Christian faith and do not find the pronouncements by some church leaders at all compatible with the God of love and compassion whom I believe in.

