End of Life Assistance (Scotland) Bill

Helen R McGeown

I am a third year medical student studying at Edinburgh University, having taken a year out last year to gain an Intercalated BMedSci.

In response to the questions on this bill- Do you agree a person should be able to request end of life assistance from a registered medical practitioner? No. While I understand that many people have considerable pain and disability towards the end of their life, I believe the doctor’s role is to alleviate that person’s pain by means other than taking their life. The ethical principles of current medical practice are based on the Hippocratic Oath, and include, “I will not give a lethal drug to anyone if I am asked, nor will I advise such a plan...But I will preserve the purity of my life and my arts.” While some may see this attitude as out-dated, I feel that conservation of this principles is vital to avoid descent into a situation where human life is seen as something that is disposable.

I think that better provision of palliative care in Scotland would allow relief of patients’ suffering and a “good” death. It must also be remembered that, according to the law of double effect, it is currently accepted that adequate pharmacological treatment (e.g. with morphine) to alleviate patient’s pain may also shorten their life. This law is surely sufficient to ensure that patients have a pain-free end-of-life.

- Are you satisfied with the requirements for age and connection with Scotland as set out in the Bill? No, see above
- Are you satisfied with the two categories of people who would qualify to be assisted under the terms of the Bill? No, see above
- The Bill outlines a several stage consent and verification process that would be required to be followed for an eligible person to receive end of life assistance. Are you satisfied with this process? No, see above
- Do you consider the level and nature of safeguards as set out in the Bill to be appropriate? No, I feel termination of life can never be “appropriate”
- Do you have any other considerations on the Bill not included in answers to the above questions? no

I strongly hope that this Bill will not go ahead. The reasons which myself and many of my colleagues chose to take a degree in medicine was to learn how to protect quality of life and preserve life. This bill runs counter to the very ideology on which medical practice has been based for centuries. I find the prospect that myself and my future colleagues would be expected to include termination of life as part of the role of a doctor deeply troubling.

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