

**SEPTEMBER 2009**

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**ASSISTED  
DYING**

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**DEBATING MATTERS**  
**TOPIC**  
**GUIDES**

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**MOTION:**

**“PHYSICIAN  
ASSISTED SUICIDE  
SHOULD REMAIN  
ILLEGAL”**

# CONTENTS

**Introduction**

**Key terms**

**The assisted dying debate in context**

**Essential reading**

**Backgrounders**

**Organisations**

**In the news**

## KEY TERMS

Assisted suicide

Medically assisted dying (incorporating patient assisted dying and voluntary euthanasia)

Palliative care

Voluntary, Non-voluntary and Involuntary euthanasia

# INTRODUCTION

**1 of 7**

# NOTES

<b>1</b>	The question of assisted dying has not been out of the media spotlight in recent months. In July 2009, campaigner and MS sufferer, Debbie Purdy, won a historic battle for clarity over assisted suicide laws when the Law Lords agreed that her husband would not be prosecuted if he assisted her in her venture to commit suicide, by taking her to the Swiss clinic Dignitas [Ref: <a href="#">Dignitas</a> ]. A spate of campaigns, sympathetic TV dramas and documentary films on the subject, with Gordon Brown's announcement that he is firmly opposed to assisted dying have revived the debate about introducing a change to the law to assist terminally ill patients who request the 'right to die'.
<b>1</b>	
<b>2</b>	
<b>4</b>	
<b>5</b>	
<b>5</b>	
<b>6</b>	

Proponents of assisted dying aim to give people the ability to control their destiny, but there is also concern that loosening the law would be a slippery slope and fear that a change in law would lead to an increasing prevalence of assisted suicide and opening the door to euthanasia. Critics, both secular and religious, oppose any new legalisation. They emphasise the value of life and argue for a focus on prolonging life or palliative care. Advocates of assisted dying retort that legalisation would allow the practice to be publicly regulated and scrutinised. They point to what they say are successful changes to the law in Belgium, Holland, Switzerland and the US state of Oregon. Ultimately, the debate is a moral one which, aside from the legal and medical issues, asks us to decide whether it is ever right for doctors to assist someone in bringing about their own death.



### What are the terminological distinctions to be aware of?

Debates over assisted suicide and euthanasia involve a complex array of distinctions. Different sides in the debate use different terms to describe the same practice. A useful framework for this debate is provided by the campaign group Dignity in Dying (formerly the Voluntary Euthanasia Society), which campaigns for 'medically assisted dying' and was the joint author of the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill [Ref: [BBC News](#)].

When a doctor indirectly assists a patient to die by prescribing medication that will enable the patient to end his own life it is known as patient assisted dying, commonly also described as physician assisted suicide. When a doctor directly assists a patient to die by administering lethal medication at a patient's request it is known as voluntary euthanasia. In practical terms some argue that assisted dying and voluntary euthanasia are indistinguishable. Fundamental moral arguments tend to apply to both, but some feel there is less moral responsibility involved on the part of the doctor in physician assisted suicide.

### Should the law change?

Whilst the proposed amendment to the Coroners and Justice Bill demands a change in law to protect those who help terminally-ill relatives and friends travel abroad for an assisted suicide, campaigners admit that the long term aim is to provide the terminally ill with the choice of an assisted death in the UK. The Assisted Dying bill would have permitted patient assisted dying but not voluntary euthanasia. It sought to allow a doctor to give a prescription for lethal drugs to a legally competent patient who had requested them and who was suffering 'unbearably'

from a terminal illness likely to result in death within six months. A survey suggested that three-quarters of the public were in favour of the legislation [Ref: [ePolitix](#)]. Proponents pointed to the bill's stringent safeguards and they continue to argue that legalisation would prevent 'back-street suicides'. Opponents remain concerned about pressure being exerted on the elderly and infirm to choose death. Disability rights campaigners argue that in a society where disabled people are not treated as equal citizens, a 'right to die' would endanger disabled people's right to live and have their lives seen as of equal value.

### Would a change in the law undermine the role of doctors?

Many doctors are concerned about assisting people to die, feeling it goes against the idea in the Hippocratic Oath [Ref: [BBC](#)] that doctors should not cause harm. Some doctors feel that a change in the law would turn them into 'executioners' and so poison doctor-patient relations. Advocates counter that a major part of a doctor's role, particularly in terminal cases, is to ease pain. Individual doctors who disagreed with assisted suicide could 'conscientiously object', argue advocates, while those who carry it out would be protected.

### What are the moral arguments?

The most straightforward argument in favour of assisted dying is that the right to die at the time and in the manner that one wishes follows directly from the right to choose how one lives. Fundamentally, proponents argue, the case for a change in law rests upon the ideas of mercy and autonomy. Opponents retort that life should be preserved at all costs, that suicide



## DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

3 of 7

NOTES

should always be discouraged and that pain and depression are resolvable issues. A number of commentators are also concerned about a change in social values, for example, the idea of courage changing from resilience in the face of adversity to 'giving up' or 'letting go'.

The concept of dignity is crucial to the debate: opponents insist that dignity must not be reduced to 'bodily integrity' whereby life is seen as no longer worth living once someone is no longer able-bodied. In contrast, advocates argue for 'dignity in dying' and see assisting someone to die as very often an act of kindness and compassion.



## ESSENTIAL READING

Q&A: Assisted suicide

David Batty *Guardian* 6 March 2009

Should we legalise assisted dying?: Yes

Saimo Chahal *The Times* 12 December 2008

Should we legalise assisted dying?: No

Dr Andrew Fergusson *The Times* 12 December 2008

### For

Step by step, we're sleepwalking into barbarism as we blur the boundaries on assisted suicide

Melanie Phillips *Daily Mail* 8 August 2009

Why I'm opposed to legalising assisted suicide

Matthew Parris *The Times* 1 August 2009

The dangers of dicing with assisted death

Gillian Bowditch *The Sunday Times* 3 May 2009

Assisted dying is fine in a perfect world. We don't live (or die) in one

Ilora Finlay *The Times* 1 April 2009

Aspirational politics: dead and buried?

Kevin Yuill *spiked* 11 December 2008

### Against

A law on assisted dying would be merciful

*The Times* 2 August 2009

Assisted dying: A Christian argument

John Cartwright *Guardian* 9 July 2009

Finger on the pulse: who can know the pain of wanting to die?

Dr Max Pemberton *Telegraph* 24 April 2009

Allowing people to arrange their own death is a simple act of kindness

A C Grayling *The Times* 31 March 2009

Denial of the right to die is sheer religious primitivism

Simon Jenkins *Guardian* 22 October 2008

### In Depth

Don't book your ticket to Dignitas just yet

Dominic Lawson *The Times* 2 August 2009

Assisted suicide: Whose life is it anyway?

Brian Appleyard *The Times* 2 August 2009

One woman's courage - and why I believe we all have the right to die with dignity

John Humphreys *Daily Mail* 25 March 2009

Ten years of death with dignity

Courtney S Campbell *New Atlantis*

4 of 7

NOTES



## BACKGROUNDERS

Assisted dying and the suicidal state of mind

*The Times* 4 August 2009

The undying love of a man who gave up everything for Debbie

Purdy

*Observer* 2 August 2009

Suicide and the law: where we stand

*The Times* 2 August 2009

The law and death

Unreliable Evidence *BBC Radio 4* 13 May 2009

Euthanasia.com

Euthanasia

*BBC Religion & Ethics*

Voluntary euthanasia

*Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

Euthanasia and end-of-life decisions

*University of San Diego Ethics Updates*

A humanist discussion of... euthanasia

*British Humanist Association*

Right to die: discussion guides

*Public Agenda*

Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide: do the moral arguments differ?

British Medical Association

Physician-assisted suicide

*University of Washington, School of Medicine*

Q&A: Assisted suicide

David Batty *Guardian* 6 March 2009

I'll die when I chose

*Panorama, BBC* 15 December 2008

The 'right to die' is a fashionable nonsense

Dominic Lawson *The Times* 14 December 2008

Assisted dying on trial

Ray Tallis *Times Literary Supplement* 24 January 2007

Results of first ever UK-wide study into euthanasia and end-of-life decisions

*Brunel University* 17 January 2006

You say murder, I say euthanasia

Claire Rayner *New Statesman* 19 June 2005

Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill

*UK Parliament* 8 January 2004

Euthanasia

*Guardian* 18 October 2001

The history of euthanasia debates in the United States and Britain

*Annals of Internal Medicine* 121(10) 15 November 1994

Coroners and Justice Bill: Amendments to the Suicide Act

*BHA Briefings* 2009

Lords debate euthanasia bill

*Today Programme, BBC Radio 4*

5 of 7

NOTES



## IN THE NEWS

'Right to die' campaigner Debbie Purdy wins House of Lords ruling

*The Times* 31 July 2009

Scotland to consider legalising assisted suicide

*Guardian* 30 July 2009

Debbie Purdy case: Pro-life group plots legal action

*Guardian* 30 July 2009

'Arrest me' says former doctor who helped pay for suicide trip

*The Times* 29 July 2009

Public supports assisted suicide for terminally ill people

*The Times* 25 July 2009

Nurses to discuss assisted suicide proposals with pro-euthanasia MP

*Guardian* 25 July 2009

British conductor dies with wife at assisted suicide clinic

*Guardian* 17 July 2009

'Dr Death' gives right-to-die lesson to seaside retirement town

*Guardian* 5 May 2009

Ms. Margo Macdonald MSP's Assisted Dying Proposals, Scotland

*Medical News Today* 21 April 2009

Dignitas founder plans death of healthy woman

*The Times* 3 April 2009

New research says majority of doctors against assisted dying

*Help the Hospices* 24 March 2009

Gordon Brown signals his opposition to assisted suicide

*Guardian* 20 March 2009

Hewitt seeks suicide law change

*BBC News* 20 March 2009

MS Sufferer Debbie Purdy loses legal bid on assisted suicide law

*Daily Telegraph* 19 February 2009

TV film provokes deep disagreement on assisted dying

*Ekklesia* 11 December 2008

No charge to be brought in assisted dying case

*The Times* 10 December 2008

Let me die with dignity says Scottish MSP

*Guardian* 7 December 2008

6 of 7

NOTES

## ORGANISATIONS

ALERT (Against Legalised Euthanasia – Research and Teaching)

British Section of the World Federation of Doctors Who Respect Human Life

Care not Killing

Church of England – Assisted Suicide

Compassion & Choices

Dignity in Dying (formerly Voluntary Euthanasia Society)

ERGO (Euthanasia Research & Guidance Organization)

Living Will

World Federation of Right to Die Societies



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**“TEENAGE CITIZENS  
THINKING DEEPLY  
ABOUT...SOCIAL  
ISSUES”**

**IAN GRANT, CEO, BRITANNICA**

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