MOTION:

“PHYSICIAN ASSISTED SUICIDE SHOULD REMAIN ILLEGAL”
THINK BIG.
THEN THINK BIGGER.

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In 2009, campaigner and MS sufferer, Debbie Purdy, won a historic case, clarifying that her husband would not be prosecuted if he assisted her in her venture to end her life at the Dignitas clinic in Switzerland [Ref: Metro]. While assisted suicide remained illegal in the UK, this case seemed to lay the ground-work for further reform. In January 2012, a report, published by the Commission on Assisted Dying, recommended the legalisation of physician assisted suicide for the terminally ill in the UK [Ref: Guardian]. These proposals have since begun to gain support amongst prominent MPs [Ref: Huffington Post].

Proponents of assisted dying aim to give people the ability to control their destiny, but there is also concern that loosening the law could lead to an increasing prevalence of assisted suicide and even open the door to euthanasia. These fears were for some reinforced by the public support garnered by the Tony Nicklinson case. Suffering from locked-in syndrome, Nicklinson pleaded with the High Court to allow a physician to administer him with a lethal injection (an act that would constitute voluntary euthanasia) as he was unable to end his life himself [Ref: BBC News]. While many within the assisted dying lobby agreed Nicklinson’s request was a step too far, they maintain that new legislation should be brought in for the terminally-ill. This they suggest would also allow the practice to be publicly regulated. However, critics, both secular and religious, continue to see it as a slippery slope and instead emphasise the value of life and argue for a focus instead on palliative care. 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 I should be aware of?

When a doctor indirectly assists a patient to die by prescribing a lethal amount of medication for them to use to commit suicide, it is known as physician assisted suicide or physician assisted dying. When a doctor directly assists a patient to die by administering lethal medication at the patient’s request it is known as voluntary euthanasia. In practical terms some argue that assisted dying and voluntary euthanasia are indistinguishable, but many feel there is less moral responsibility involved, on the part of the doctor, in physician assisted suicide.

Should the law change?

The changes to the law proposed by the Commission on Assisted Dying would permit patient assisted dying but not voluntary euthanasia. They seek to allow a doctor to give a prescription for lethal drugs to a legally competent patient suffering from terminal illness, under the proviso that they had been given all the medical options and were under no obvious pressure from others in making their decision [Ref: Guardian]. Proponents often refer to the fact that while many of the 160 Britons who ended their lives at Dignitas since 2002 were accompanied by friends and family [Ref: Daily Mail], no one to date has been prosecuted [Ref: Human Truth]. Furthermore, according to a recent survey, two-thirds of the population are in favour of legalising assisted dying [Ref: BBC News]. This, they argue, represents a dramatic shift in the sentiment of the judiciary and the public which should be mirrored in legislature. Opponents, however, feel this could prove to be a slippery slope. Given the huge amount of support Tony Nicklinson’s case attracted, disability campaigners are concerned that new legislation may eventually lead to voluntary euthanasia. In a society where the disabled and elderly are not treated as equal citizens, a ‘right to die’ would, in their minds, endanger their right to live, especially in times of economic crisis and cuts to healthcare spending. Pointing to what they deem successful changes in legislation in Belgium, Holland, Switzerland and the US state of Oregon, proponents retort that stringent safeguards would ensure the vulnerable were protected.

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

Despite the evident shift in public opinion on this issue, many doctors remain concerned about assisting people to die. In June 2012, a member of the British Medical Association forwarded a motion that they rescind their opposition to reform, yet the vast majority voted to maintain their position, one member stating that it was important that doctors ‘never walk away from their patients’ [Ref: BBC News]. Advocates counter that a major part of a doctor’s role, particularly in terminal cases, is to ease pain.

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. Opponents retort that life should be preserved at all costs, that suicide should always be discouraged and that pain and depression can be eased by palliative care. 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 very often see assisting someone to die as an act of kindness and compassion.
ESSENTIAL READING

Q&A: Assisted suicide
BBC News 5 January 2013

FOR
Death is part of our human experience
Sally Foster-Fulton New Statesman 24 September 2012
Assisted dying: the harm in helping
Sarah Wollaston Guardian 17 August 2012
In Tony Nicklinson’s heroic suffering, I can’t help but see the case
for life
Jonathan Jones Guardian 17 August 2012
Ray Gosling and the problem with euthanasia
Brendan O’Neill spiked 18 February 2010

AGAINST
Assisted dying: we need a more humane law
Charles Falconer Guardian 5 January 2013
Assisted suicide comment: the dying should have advice from
professionals
Jo Cartwright Telegraph 16 August 2012
Would you be happy to live like Tony Nicklinson?
Polly Toynbee Guardian 16 August 2012
Assisted dying needs a change of heart
Ian Blair Independent 1 January 2012

IN DEPTH
The case for assisted dying
Raymond Tallis New Humanist September 2012
Tony Nicklinson and a doctor’s take on assisted dying
Alan White New Statesman 19 June 2012
A matter of life, death and assisted dying
Anushka Asthana Guardian 31 January 2010
Human rights: clarifying the law on assisted suicide
Saimo Chahal Law Gazette 20 August 2009
BACKGROUNDERS

Assisted suicide: 10 years of dying at Dignitas
Philippa Roxby BBC News 21 October 2012

Assisted suicide: Over my dead body
Economist 20 October 2012

Assisted dying: who’s to decide when a life is not worth living?
Andrew Brown Guardian 11 September 2012

Assisted dying: simple, neat – and wrong
Kevin Yuill spiked 20 August 2012

My heart goes out to my friend Tony Nicklinson, but the law
must NEVER allow anyone to kill another
Lord Falconer Daily Mail/19 August 2012

Assisted Death or Assisted Living
Jill Shaw Ruddock Huffington Post 3 July 2012

A necessary fudge?
Nelson Jones New Statesman 5 January 2012

Euthanasia and end-of-life decisions
University of San Diego Ethics Updates

Voluntary euthanasia
Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy

ORGANISATIONS

Care not Killing
Commission on Assisted Dying
Compassion & Choices
Dignity in Dying (formerly Voluntary Euthanasia Society)
ERGO (Euthanasia Research & Guidance Organization)
Liverpool Care Pathway
Living Will
IN THE NEWS

Assisted dying open to abuse, CoF warns
Christian Today 15 November 2012

Assisted suicide campaigner says Scots can lead the way
Scotsman 3 November 2012

Terminally-ill retired magistrate ‘starved herself to death after being inspired by right-to-die
Daily Mail 19 October 2012

Man with locked-in syndrome prepares to appeal for right to assisted death
Guardian 20 September 2012

MSP brings back proposals to legalise assisted dying
BBC News 19 September 2012

Norman Lamb second new health minister to call for reform of assisted dying laws
Telegraph 10 September 2012

BMA rejects assisted suicide move as one delegate likens it to murder
Independent 27 August 2012

Goodbye, the time has come: poignant last words of ‘locked-in’ Tony Nicklinson
Evening Standard 22 August 2012

Tony Nicklinson loses High court right to die case
BBC News 16 August 2012

Legalising assisted dying ‘doesn’t lead to more opting for death’: Lancet
Telegraph 11 July 2012

Sir Terry Pratchett: opponents of assisted suicide stir up needles hysteria
Telegraph 15 June 2012

Bad death akin to botched abortion, BMJ editor says as calls doctors to end opposition
Telegraph 14 June 2012

MPs Debate Assisted Suicide Regulations Which Allow Prosecutors Discretion
Huffington Post 27 March 2012

‘Locked-in syndrome’ man to have right to die case heard
BBC News 12 March 2012

Law on euthanasia challenged by Tony Nicklinson case
BBC News 12 March 2012

Assisted suicide is ‘morally wrong’ warns Archbishop of Canterbury
Independent 9 February 2012

Assisted suicide cases guidelines issued by GMC
BBC News 6 February 2012

Assisted suicide one step closer after High Court paves the way for doctors to help terminally-ill
Daily Mail 27 January 2012

Objections to right-to-die plea
BBC News 23 January 2012

Terminally ill? No, but I still demand the right to end my life
Mirror 6 January 2012

Allow assisted suicide for those with less than a year to live
Telegraph 5 January 2012

Controversial call to lift ban on helping the terminally ill to die
Mirror 5 January 2012

Lord Falconer: assisted suicide law fails to protect or punish
Telegraph 1 January 2012

Assisted suicide to be shown on BBC
Mirror 7 June 2011

New guidelines ease relatives’ fear of assisted suicide
Independent 23 September 2009

‘Right to die’ campaigner Debbie Purdy wins House of Lords ruling
The Times 31 July 2009
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