

The National Council for Palliative Care's response to The House of Lords Select Committee report on the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill

Executive Summary

The key points of The National Council for Palliative Care's response to the report of the House of Lords Select Committee on the Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill are:

- The National Council welcomes the significance attached by the Select Committee to ensuring access to high-quality palliative care for all who need it. This is an important objective in its own right, regardless of whether or not voluntary euthanasia or assisted suicide come into law.
- Priority should be given to providing equitable access to palliative care for all before pursuing assisted suicide or voluntary euthanasia, particularly given the major legal and ethical challenges and demands on resources that implementation of legislation would involve and the proportionately small number of people likely to benefit.
- Whilst the Select Committee reached a number of conclusions, it also left some very significant questions open. There is a need for more evidence-based information about these issues, rather than the myths and prejudices which currently predominate. The National Council wants to contribute to establishing some of these facts. If the law is to change, it should only be undertaken on the basis of the fullest possible information. In the absence of such information, this is therefore not the right time to change the law.

Summary of actions recommended or in progress

- The National Council's mission is to promote access to palliative care for all who need it. Through its policy unit, it is developing evidence-based policy designed to identify and meet the needs of all patients regardless of diagnosis. The work of ensuring that all who need it have access to palliative care is for society as a whole, and will be brought about through partnership between the public, voluntary sector and independent sectors.

- The National Council will seek to establish an ethics collaborative of interested organisations, with the aim of researching and exploring further the issues raised by the Select Committee in the report which remain unresolved.
- The National Council believes that the following issues identified by the Select Committee, in particular, require further research:
 - a. Qualitative understanding of the views both of the public and of professionals affected by implementation of proposed legislation
 - b. The extent to which assisted suicide or euthanasia is being practised illegally in Britain
 - c. Ethical issues created by the proposed legislation
 - d. The extent to which palliative care can address the non-physical aspects of suffering, through psychological, spiritual and social care, as well as physical suffering
 - e. The extent to which a slippery slope might exist
 - f. The quality and availability of palliative care in jurisdictions where assisted suicide or voluntary euthanasia are legal
 - g. The concerns raised by vulnerable groups such as older people and people living with disability
 - h. The impact on the relationships between patients and their professional carers in the context of British medical practice.

Further comment on the above issues is set out in the full publication, which is available to buy from NCPC at £20 per copy. To order this publication, please log on to the website (www.ncpc.org.uk) and download the publications order form.