

This government cannot be trusted with assisted dying

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I have refrained from discussing the assisted dying bill, but in the light of the decision made on Friday, very largely by Labour and LibDem MPs, to approve the second reading of this bill, I think it appropriate to do so.

I can see why, on rare occasions, assisted dying might be an appropriate option within a care system. In principle, I think this option should exist.

In practice, I do not trust this government with that option. Nor would I have trusted the Tories with it. The reason why is straightforward. I think legitimised suicide has always to be a last resort. My fear is that it will become anything but that because of government pressure to normalise it.

The problems are easy to identify.

We do not spend enough on health care to prevent people from dying in pain. We should spend what is required.

We do not spend enough on social care to support those towards the end of their lives. We should spend what is required.

As a state, we spend very little on palliative care or support for hospice care. We should spend what is required.

We do not support research into how to help people have a good death. We should spend what is required.

There is too little research into pain management for the dying and how the problem of double-effect (that the pain killers issued for this purpose might themselves hasten death) can be managed both medically and legally, with protection being provided for patients and doctors alike. That should happen.

And far too many find managing the process of securing care within the NHS an administrative nightmare. There is, in particular, a lot of evidence that those who are

not used to managing bureaucracy find this very hard, and there is, as a result, a clear class bias in accessing care because the middle classes are usually most experienced in this way. This then leads to issues around economic access to care, which is decidedly unequal at present.

Put all these, I think undeniable, facts together, and we have to ask how assisted dying might work when we have a government that is indifferent to at least one-quarter of all children living in poverty and tens of thousands of pensioners dying from hypothermia each year because they will not provide the financial assistance that either group need. What will happen, in that case, when assisted dying is permitted?

Coercion by relatives will, I hope, be unlikely because I expect safeguards to prevent this will be made available. But the risk of coercion from a state that is not willing to fund palliative care - and claims it has to balance its books at all costs - seems likely to me. I can imagine a care institution saying in the future that it cannot fund a dying person's care, but they can fund their assisted dying, believing that is the option they can afford within the budget limits provided by the government.

For that reason, I cannot support assisted dying until the NHS is properly funded, social care is properly funded, palliative care is provided to all who need it, and doctors are provided with all the support they need to provide the care a person needs and wants.

Right now, there is no chance of that, and in that case, the risk of state-sanctioned killing to ensure budgets are balanced is something I cannot support but which I fear will happen.

To be blunt, this government cannot be trusted on issues like this. They are too indifferent to the reality of life in the UK for that to be the case.