

Investigation into Ending Life

ORAL SUBMISSION

I want to acknowledge the emotional intensity of this debate because we are literally talking about life and death. I helped care for my father who died of cancer some years ago and have accompanied others at the end of their lives. It is very hard to debate these issues because often they arise when someone is desperately ill and to oppose assisted dying looks to be hard hearted and uncaring, but what is at stake? This is why an investigation like this is necessary to examine how we make judgements on these issues in a wider framework. The central question is how does our society value the whole experience of human life?

In the rush to demand personal autonomy our society is losing its sense of collective responsibility. The question of end of life decisions becomes a matter of personal choice. However society is not just a collection of autonomous individuals we are interdependent on each other for life itself so we need to act in the interest of all people. As a society we do limit personal autonomy in the interest of the greater good for example: noise control, road rules and employment law.

In many ways our society value lives differently. As an example we invest in suicide prevention programmes yet we talk about assisted dying for people who are seriously ill. We value life for those deemed fit and able-bodied yet consider it compassionate to assist a person to die because they are seriously ill and will die soon anyway.

I suggest that some triggers for suicide and assisted dying are similar but society responds very differently because we perceive one life of more value than the other. Being fit and able is highly prized in our society while being old, dependent and disabled is not. It is against this backdrop that some people request assisted dying and other people may feel it is their duty to be assisted to die. Is this what we as a society want? Do we want to ensure all people are valued until they die in whatever situation they find themselves in? Do we value the diversity of human life including the challenging experience of being dependent on each other?

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