

Item of business :

End of Life Choice Bill

Submission name :

Dr Robert Sheehan

Comments

I oppose the End of Life Choice Bill because it is impossible to guarantee that people will not be pressured into choosing assisted suicide and because it permanently changes the relationship between medical practitioners and their patients. I speak as someone who has lost both parents in recent years and seen the difficulties of dying from cancer and Alzheimer's.

Supporters of the Bill insist it is creating a choice. No one is going to be forced to commit suicide and the Bill protects against such pressure. This statement is disingenuous. Vulnerable people will feel pressured to commit suicide, and of course they will feel pressured into signing documents attesting to the fact that they are making this choice freely of their own accord. Humans are like that. We want to relieve the stress we feel we are adding to others. We want to leave some inheritance to our children rather than seeing it all go in medical and hospital costs. Innocent people who do not wish to die will die as a result of this Bill. It is impossible to safeguard against people lying about their motivation.

The Bill provides for the medical practitioner to "do his or her best to ensure that the person expresses his or her wish free from pressure from any other person". The problem is determining the motives of the patient. The pressure may well be internal, i.e. "I do not wish to be a burden. If I linger for another 6 months it will cost my family most of their inheritance." Having this component of the Bill is effectively asking the medical practitioner to act as judge and jury over the information received.

This is not a problem in other medical situations because the actions of the medical practitioner are directed to save life not to end it. Treatment options are only offered because they will improve the health or survivability of the patient. This bill is unique in this regard and brings about a permanent and undesirable change in the relationship between medical practitioners and their patients. In other situations it may be the withholding of treatment which causes death, but the medical practitioner does not become the effective cause of death.

One of the reasons we removed the death penalty was because a number of innocent people were mistakenly convicted and executed. We decided it was better for hundreds of murderers to live than for one innocent person to die. We really didn't want this on our conscience as a society. Every person who votes for this bill will have this consequence on their conscience. Think about your own parents, what would they choose if it meant making life easier for you.

A consequence of the Bill passing will be the deaths of people who feel pressured to die. There are no safeguards strong enough to stop this consequence. So in the same way we removed the death penalty to save one innocent person from an unjust death we must not pass this bill. The stakes are too high.

For those who are suffering there are medical and social alternatives to choosing suicide. They may not be the person's preferred choice but they are supported by countless studies and the majority of the medical profession.

Recommendations

For all elderly vulnerable people, for the relationship between medical practitioners and their patients, and for the good of New Zealand society please reject the Bill.