

Assisted Suicide (Scotland) Bill

Alzheimer Scotland

Introduction

Alzheimer Scotland is Scotland's leading dementia voluntary organisation. We work to improve the lives of everyone affected by dementia through our campaigning work nationally and locally and through facilitating the involvement of people with dementia and carers in getting their views and experiences heard. We have a membership of 6000, including carers, people with dementia, professionals, professional bodies and a range of voluntary and private agencies. We provide specialist services such as day care, home support and carer support (through training programmes and support groups) in over 60 locations and offer information and support through our 24 hour freephone Dementia Helpline, our website (www.alzscot.org) and our wide range of publications.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the proposed Assisted Suicide (Scotland) Bill. This is a complex ethical issue that raises strong emotions and divisions of opinion. In acknowledging people with dementia will have a broad range of views on this very personal issue, our response does not attempt to unravel the ethical issues or examine moral considerations. Instead our response raises the concerns we have with the implications of the proposed Bill.

We have not responded directly to the questions, as they presume support in principle for the introduction of legislation to permit assisted suicide in Scotland

We consulted with our Human Rights and Public Policy Committee on the formulation of this submission.

People with dementia

Dementia is the progressive loss of the powers of the brain; gradually over a period of years most functions of the brain will be affected. People with dementia gradually lose the capacity to make decisions. Advance statements, advance directives and living wills provide people with dementia an opportunity to make known their wishes and preferences about future care and medical treatment which they may not be able to communicate later on.

The proposed Bill makes provision to ensure that only those with capacity can make a request for assistance. We accept that this means that many people in the with dementia would not fall within the provisions of the Bill as they may be deemed not to have capacity as prescribed in Section 12 of the Bill. However, people with dementia in the early stages of the illness, who have capacity and who have some other life limiting illness, may be deemed capable of making the decision to request assisted suicide. It is our view that the continued stigma attached to dementia, which results in a negative perception of dementia and the lack of support services may influence any decision the person may make to die.

Alzheimer Scotland is against legislation to legalise assisted suicide at this time because service provision to provide high quality palliative care throughout the illness is inconsistent and often poor for people with dementia.

The infrastructure to provide appropriate palliative care and end of life care does not exist. There is lack of support, inadequate planning and gross under funding, which results in unnecessary distress for people with dementia and carers. Until these inequalities are addressed people with dementia may not have a balanced view of the options; end of life choices do not exist. We therefore could not support legislation at this time.

The unintended impact of proposals to change the law may have the effect of endorsing discrimination and adversely affect investment in dementia care services. We promote the human rights of people with dementia, including their right to appropriate care and support from diagnosis until the end of their life. People with dementia should never be made to feel they are a burden on others; their human rights must be maintained.

Jim Pearson
Deputy Director of Policy
Alzheimer Scotland