

## Assisted suicide: victories and challenges



2013 will bring more pressure to legalise assisted suicide in Britain with two new parliamentary bills and an ongoing court case to threaten further the lives of elderly and disabled people. But there is also good cause to look back with thanks to God for victories in 2012.

Lord Falconer's 'Commission on Assisted Dying', which reported on 5 January 2012, predictably recommended a change in the law to recommend assisted suicide (and not euthanasia) for mentally competent adults with less than twelve months to live. CMF, as a leading member of the Care Not Killing Alliance (CNK), played a prominent role in discrediting the Commission's findings and exposing its funders and backers.

David Burrowes MP headed up a Westminster Hall debate<sup>1</sup> in Parliament in January on the Commission report which highlighted MPs' desires to frame the debate around the provision of excellent palliative care rather than any measure to introduce assisted suicide. On 13 February members of the House of Lords blocked<sup>2</sup> a move (which would have weakened the application of the law) to fetter the Director of Public Prosecutions in his judgements by placing his prosecution policy on a 'statutory footing'. A later debate<sup>3</sup> in the House of Commons on 28 March defeated a similar move by Richard Ottaway MP, further endorsed palliative care and rejected any weakening of the Suicide Act.

In June the British Medical Association defeated an attempt to move it to a neutral position on assisted suicide which was spearheaded by a new pressure group called 'Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying'.<sup>4</sup> This underlined the fact that majority medical opinion remains opposed to assisted suicide.

The First European Symposium on the prevention of euthanasia in Europe took place in Edinburgh on 7-8 September<sup>5</sup> and was attended by around 100 delegates from twelve countries. It strengthened ties between Christian doctors and others all over the continent who oppose current threats.

Whilst the conference was going on two newly appointed health ministers, Anna Soubry and Norman Lamb, aroused controversy by announcing their support for legalising assisted suicide but a poll released shortly afterwards showed that seven out of ten MPs would not support such a measure.<sup>6</sup>

Three High Court judges in August rejected challenges by two men with conditions resembling

'locked-in syndrome' to change the law.

Tony Nicklinson had argued that the principle of necessity should allow a doctor to end his life without fear of prosecution for murder, and that the current laws interfered with his Article 8 right to his private life. 'Martin' had also argued under Article 8 and wanted the DPP, the Solicitors' Regulatory Authority and the General Medical Council to make clear in advance the extent to which solicitors and doctors could assist his suicide. CNK intervened successfully in both cases.

Lord Falconer has now published a new draft bill calling for doctors to have the power to help mentally competent adults with less than one year to live to kill themselves. This will be debated in the House of Lords next year.

In addition Margo MacDonald MSP has announced that she is going to try again to legalise assisted suicide in Scotland, just over a year after her last failed attempt. We expect the bill to be debated next spring.

Meanwhile reports from jurisdictions that have legalised euthanasia and assisted suicide continue to heighten concerns about incremental extension. According to the Dutch media,<sup>6</sup> euthanasia deaths in the Netherlands in 2011 increased by 18% to 3,695. This follows increases of 13% in 2009 and 19% in 2010 with euthanasia now accounting for 2.8% of all Dutch deaths.

In the US state of Washington assisted suicide cases increased 40% in one year,<sup>7</sup> whilst there has been a 450% increase in neighbouring Oregon and 700% increase in Switzerland since 1998.<sup>8</sup>

Meanwhile others face similar battles abroad, especially in Canada, the US and Australia where the battle is as intense as that in the UK. The recent referendum in Massachusetts (see News Reviews), however, has been a particular encouragement in showing how broad-based coalitions can be successful in turning public opinion and resisting a change in the law.

Under this relentless assault on the laws of our own country and others, Christian doctors need to continue to lead the way in promoting good care and opposing a change in the law.

*'Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy'* (Proverbs 31:8, 9).

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### references

1. <http://bit.ly/Qpwxw>
2. <http://bit.ly/XmgG6k>
3. <http://bit.ly/HeJBu4>
4. *Triple Helix* 2012; Summer:4 <http://bit.ly/Xmj8d2>
5. <http://bit.ly/Rf4lg0>
6. <http://bit.ly/S2E0xh>
7. <http://bit.ly/Jg4UE1>
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