

“Beware of Granting a Licence to Kill the Old and Sick”

***by Marion Shoard,
published in the Daily Express, 31 January, 2006***

It sounds like a no-brainer. People gripped by horrible illnesses with no prospect of recovery should have the chance to be put out of their misery. It is not surprising that in compassionate Britain a Bill to provide "assisted dying" for the terminally ill is getting a favourable hearing.

Last week's TV pictures of Dr Anne Turner, forced to travel to a foreign land to end her life in a soulless Zurich dying room by Britain's apparently reactionary prohibition on assisted suicide, fuelled what is becoming a growing campaign. Yet those eager to open the way to legalised killing of those in the last stages of fatal conditions need an urgent reality check.

The vast majority of those who would be affected by the proposed new law are of course frail elderly people. We like to think of those in their twilight years as being surrounded by friends and family eager only to mitigate the many unwelcome conditions that inevitably come to afflict all too many of them. Sometimes it is indeed like that, but all too often the reality is altogether less pleasant.

While researching a book on the problems of later life, I spent many hours observing the final stages of people's lives. What became blindingly apparent was that the attitudes and intentions of those closest to elderly people, while often admirably supportive and attentive, are not always so. Inevitably, compassion is sometimes tempered by other pressing considerations.

The sons and daughters of elderly people usually have sons and daughters of their own, whose needs are often urgent. Nowadays, they may well have pressing debts to clear, quite apart from the temptations presented by conservatories and cruises. Often, the survival of an elderly parent whose life may not look worth living can come to seem like an obstacle to other more important things.

Care home bills may easily cost those families that have to pay them out of their own pockets £600 a week. Providing help for a bedridden elderly person in his or her own home can cost almost as much. The family home is many people's only real asset. If it is sold to pay care home fees, they can see the only significant sum they may ever get their hands on withering away week by week in front of their eyes.

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This does not mean they are going to kill their parents, nor would the current Bill enable them to do so. It is all rather more subtle than that. Hints can be dropped about school fees. A grandparent may feel guilty about continuing to live what looks like a pointless life at the expense of those who have their lives still before them.

The "voluntary" option of a useful death can be made to seem the best thing for all concerned. Deals can be done, without anybody quite admitting that they exist. Yes, I'll sign the form, dear. Can I come home for Christmas?

So what, you may well ask. Isn't early release from a miserable existence that benefits others a thoroughly good thing? Well, it would come at a price.

Firstly, we should beware of assuming that what looks to the outsider like a life devoid of quality is quite as terrible as it may seem. High-profile cases of those seeking to end their lives, like Dr Turner, are the exception not the rule. Most people, confronted with a genuinely free choice between death and any conceivable alternative, choose life. Medical staff, who would have much influence over who should live and who should die, frequently under-estimate the persistence of the will to live.

Institutionalising the killing of elderly people would diminish the sanctity of life in our society as a whole. In particular, it would further undermine the position of elderly people who need care, whether or not their lives are threatened.

Our treatment of our seniors is already a national scandal. The care they receive in care homes and in their own homes leaves much to be desired. What these citizens need is a thorough-going programme of help and support and a radical improvement in their status in society, not a licence to be killed.

The tragedy is that the misery so often attending the final stages of life, which makes imposed death look like an acceptable alternative, would largely be avoidable if we were prepared to make the effort to ensure that everybody had access to state-of-the-art palliative care.

Palliative medicine has advanced by leaps and bounds in recent years. These days, chest secretions can be dried up, fever calmed, coughing soothed, insomnia cured, breathlessness treated, pain lessened, vomiting prevented and constipation alleviated. It is towards these ends that our endeavours should be addressed. Killing only diminishes us all.

Marion Shoard is the author of A Survival Guide to Later Life.