Judy Davies (2013) If we change the law - what follows?

Dave has been admitted to a hospice in the end stages of cancer. He has had enough. He says to the chaplain visiting him: Why can’t the doctors give me something to end it all?”

Later that same morning, the chaplain encounters a family, desperately worried about their elderly mother. “She’s wasting away”, they say. “Why won’t they feed her?”

Anyone who works in palliative care has heard those anguished questions. They are both cries for help, yet asking for totally different things. They remind us that this is a complex area, where patients and families are often as fearful of death being hastened as of life prolonged.

Those who argue for assisted dying emphasize the importance of personal autonomy. They stress that there will be safeguards to ensure that those who ask for help to die are in the terminal stages of their illness, are suffering unbearably, and are certain of what they want. And this is, apparently, what the majority of the general public wants, too, if the latest polls are accurate.

So why do I feel reluctant to go down this road?

First, because I have seen too many people change their minds. It’s commonly thought that palliative care is just for people right at the end of their lives; but in reality good palliative care can make a difference to those who have months ahead of them, and are struggling with pain or depression, or are fearful of what the dying process may be like. I’ve seen people who initially wanted to die find fresh reasons to live.

Second, because once this line is crossed, I believe that it will fundamentally change the relationship between doctor and patient. I think of the recent outcry over the Liverpool Care Pathway for the dying, and imagine the fears that would be aroused if doctors were legally able to end their patients’ lives.

Finally, I fear what this will do to us as a society. I worry about a process of almost imperceptible drift: that what begins with carefully limited cases will not end there, that we will find it easier to make broader judgements about what constitutes a worthwhile life; and that such judgements will increase the anxieties of those who can feel most vulnerable, because they are frail, elderly or severely disabled.

I haven’t argued here from a specifically Christian viewpoint. There’s a common misconception that it’s just religious people who worry about a change in the law, and who seek to impose their views on others. But I know many who don’t share my beliefs yet share my concerns about the implications of a change that, once embarked upon, may have unintended consequences that can never be undone.

Judy Davies

President of the AHPCC

22 May 2013