

After Belgium, UK Mulling Assisted Suicide Bill

The U.K. government says that it will allow members of Parliament (MPs) a free vote on a bill to introduce assisted suicide for terminally ill patients in England and Wales, *The Telegraph* has reported.

The bill, put forward by Labour peer Lord Charles Falconer, proposes to allow doctors to prescribe drugs to help “mentally competent” adults end their lives if they are judged to have less than six months to live.

Conservative and liberal Democrat MPs and peers, including coalition ministers, will be given a free vote on the legislation, which is expected to come before Parliament in the next few months.

Norman Lamb, the minister responsible for care for elderly and disabled people, indicated in a statement on Saturday that he will vote in favor of the proposed reforms.

But a change in the law has been strongly opposed by doctors, churches and disability groups who believe the proposed legislation will place the most vulnerable in society at risk.

More than 70 percent of doctors who responded to a recent consultation by the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) said they believe the body should remain opposed to the provision of assisted suicide in the U.K.

In 2012, the British Medical Association rejected a proposal to adopt a neutral stance on the issue, warning that any safeguards proposed by those championing assisted suicide were “no more than a checklist.”

Last week, Baroness Campbell of Surbiton, who has a degenerative illness, said it would be a “dangerous time” to consider a weakening of the law in this area due to the “growing hostility” toward frail, elderly and disabled people in the wake of the recession.

A Care Not Killing spokesman says, “It is disappointing that the government is not going to more actively oppose this bill. Various attempts to change the law on assisted suicide and euthanasia have been debated and rejected by Parliament in recent years. Instead of repeating this process, we should be talking about how to ensure everyone has access to the care, drugs and treatment they need.”

Richard Hawkes, chief executive of the disability charity Scope, says, “Many disabled people will be left feeling very concerned by suggestions that a change in the law on assisted suicide could be one step closer.

“The ban on assisted suicide sends a really powerful message countering the view that if you’re disabled, it’s not worth being alive and that you’re a burden. It provides crucial protection to any person who feels under pressure to end their life.

“This issue tells us a lot about attitudes to disability. Why is it when someone who is not disabled wants to commit suicide, we try to talk them out of it, but when a disabled person wants to commit suicide, we focus on how we can make that possible?”