

Dignitas founder plans assisted suicide of healthy woman - David Brown - Times - 3-04-09

The founder of the Swiss assisted suicide clinic Dignitas was criticised yesterday after revealing plans to help a healthy woman to die alongside her terminally ill husband.

Ludwig Minelli described suicide as a "marvellous opportunity" that should not be restricted to the terminally ill or people with severe disabilities. Critics said that the plans highlighted the risks of proposals to legalise assisted suicides in Britain for people in the final stages of a terminal illness.

The Dignitas clinic in Zurich claims to have assisted in the deaths of more than 100 Britons. The Zurich University Clinic found that more than a fifth of people who had died at Dignitas did not have a terminal condition.

Mr Minelli said that anyone who has "mental capacity" should be allowed to have an assisted suicide, claiming that it would save money for the NHS.

He expects to go to the Swiss courts to seek a ruling in the case of a Canadian couple who have made a suicide pact to die together. "The husband is ill, his partner is not ill, but she told us here in my living room that, 'If my husband goes, I would go at the same time with him'," he said.

Mr Minelli, a human rights lawyer, told the BBC that the British were obsessed with the requirement for a patient to be terminally ill to justify an assisted suicide. "It is not a condition to have a terminal illness," he said. "Terminal illness is a British obsession. As a human rights lawyer I am opposed to the idea of paternalism. We do not make decisions for other people. We should have a nicer attitude to suicide, saying suicide is a very good possibility to escape."

Mr Minelli admitted that some of the people who had been helped to die at the clinic had been psychiatric patients with schizophrenia and bipolar disorders. Swiss psychiatrists are refusing to co-operate with Dignitas so the clinic allows patients to provide their own medical papers from Britain.

"We have some problems because all the Swiss organisations of psychiatrists have told the public that they will not make such reports," he said. "If we would have a psychiatrist from the UK giving an extended report, then no problems."

Mr Minelli said that failed suicide attempts caused problems and extra costs for the NHS. "For 50 attempts you have one suicide and the odds of failing with heavy costs," he said.

Patricia Hewitt, a former Health Secretary, called last month for a change in the law to protect those who helped terminally ill relatives and friends to travel abroad for an assisted suicide. Yesterday she criticised Dignitas for allowing people with mental illnesses to have an assisted suicide without being seen by a psychiatrist in Switzerland.

"I don't think that would be an adequate safeguard for somebody suffering from a psychiatric illness," she said. "That's why it would be much better to have a British law on this issue."

Sarah Wootton, the chief executive of Dignity in Dying, which is campaigning to decriminalise assisted suicide in Britain, expressed concern over Mr Minelli's position. "We believe the law should change in the UK to allow terminally ill, mentally competent, adults to have the choice of an assisted death but we are also very clear that should be within a strict framework of legal safeguards," she said.

"I am very concerned about Dignitas. Mental competence is an essential precursor to an assisted death and we are absolutely immovable on that. We need to give a clear signal that to assist non-terminally ill adults to die is wrong."

Peter Byrne, the director of public education at the Royal College of Psychiatrists, said that he could not imagine a British psychiatrist writing a report that a patient was mentally capable of agreeing to suicide.

"Although it would be possible to say that someone who is miserable or in pain has the capacity to understand that they want to end their life, that could simply be hiding undiagnosed depression," he said.

"I have seen more than 5,000 people who have attempted suicide and the state of mind is never clear. Hardly any of them after the event still wishes they were dead."

A spokesman for Care Not Killing, a campaign opposed to any weakening of the law on euthanasia or assisted suicide, said that Mr Minelli's comments showed why any legalisation of assisted dying would open a "Pandora's box of nightmare scenarios".

"Once the border on assisted suicides is opened it will be impossible to close," he said. "It would have huge public policy consequences for the plight of people who are terminally ill, very old or suffering from mental illness."

Although suicide is no longer a crime in England and Wales, aiding and abetting suicide is a criminal offence punishable by up to 14 years in prison. No one has so far been prosecuted for taking a person abroad for an assisted suicide.

Swiss authorities say that they are reviewing their assisted suicide law, which could make it more difficult for people to travel to the country to die. At present Swiss law forbids assisting a suicide only if there is a "selfinterested motivation".