

Assisted dying

The Guardian March 22nd 2019 draws attention to the Royal College of Physicians' return to a position of neutrality on the question of whether the law should change to allow a doctor to hasten a patient's death in keeping with their wishes. Amna Mohdin (page 15) presents figures from a recent survey of Fellows and Members of the college www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/no-majority-view-assisted-dying-moves-rcp-position-neutral .

With 43.4 % against a change and 40.5% in favour of change, neither lobby achieved the pre-set criterion of 60% for the college to make a recommendation. Voting in 2006 and 2014 had confirmed opposition to change in the law, but used a different criterion.

Comments from 'Dying with dignity' www.dignityindying.org.uk/ draw support for their cause from the Royal College apparent shift to neutrality. Lady Ilora Finlay and Lord Alex Carlile for 'Living and Dying Well' see things differently: having already described the Royal College's 'consultation' as a travesty because the criterion introduced virtually determined that that neither 'for' nor 'against' a change of law would reach it: <http://www.livinganddyingwell.org.uk/comments/a-travesty-of-a-consultation>

It is clear that doctors most closely involved with the care of people who know they are dying - palliative care specialists and hospice staff – wish the law to stay as it is.

Simon Jenkins (page 4 of the Guardian Journal of that day) mounts a polemic on the subject which tosses alarm and outrage with abandon and no pretence of balance: He would have it that doctors are the principal cause of death. 'The NHS has nationalised death'. 'I do not grant the right over whether I live or die to a doctor, a judge or a politician.'

He accuses those who wish to maintain the status quo – which has been the wisdom of centuries – of persisting with dogma and of caricaturing those who speak for change as seeking to usurp the power of God.

This is not a matter to be dealt with using the knockabout phrases of public house banter. It is good to find an adult consideration of death and dying given space in the national newspapers and on television (Five Minutes to Midnight www.bbc.co.uk/news/stories-47047579). The prospect of death and consideration of the place, the context and the experience of last days and hours is a sobering and rewarding exercise. It does not need hype or hyperbole.

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