

Edinburgh



SATURDAY, APRIL 25, 2009

## Mouthpiece

# Assisted dying isn't only way terminally ill can maintain dignity

**W**ITH respect to Margo MacDonald's proposal to legalise assisted dying, it is interesting to note that the typical person who wants assisted suicide, in places such as Oregon in the USA, has been shown to often be a pragmatic person who has always been in control of their lives.

This also means that they often want control of their dying process and want to avoid having to be cared for in a way that is offensive to them. They want to be in control of the day and time when they are finished, when life has served them, and enough is enough; they are ready to die. Indeed, studies have shown that many of these persons find being cared for to be intolerable even though palliative care can adequately address any physical suffering.

## Loss of control doesn't mean loss of respect, says Calum MacKellar

In the UK, autonomy over the time and mode of one's own death generally exists since suicide is not an offence in law. The debate in this case concerns persons who are not physically able to take their own lives and whether it is discriminatory or objectionable that somebody who is capable of committing suicide is able to do so, but somebody who happens to lack the physical capacity to commit suicide is denied that possibility.

This was one of the arguments put forward by Diane Pretty who was eventually told, in 2002, by the European Court of Human

Rights in Strasbourg that a "mercy killing" could legitimately be prohibited by a state, such as the UK, and that a person did not have a "right" to die.

Moreover, it has been suggested that persons who fear they will lose the respect due to their dignity during the final stages of a terminal illness should be able to "die with dignity" before these stages occur.

Does this not then promote the idea that there is no place for lives that are dependant on others and that to be dependant on others is unacceptable?

Indeed, it would be very unfortunate for any persons to believe that they can lose part or all their dignity just because they will no longer be in total control of their lives. Questions should indeed be asked concerning the

dangerous way in which such people understand the concept of human dignity when they seem to believe that dignity is only dependent on the manner in which they can control their lives.

In this respect, it may be useful to remember that a sense of humility is important and that there is no shame in being dependent on others.

As infants are completely dependent on their parents without any perceived lack of human dignity, governments around the world should maybe encourage societies, comprising an ageing population, to accept that elderly or disabled people may also become dependent on others without losing any of their dignity.

■ *Dr. Calum MacKellar is director of research for the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics*