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Level of support for euthanasia legislation determined by wording in opinion polls

ONE of the major justifications for supporting the bill to give terminally ill people the right to take their own lives is the notion that a majority of the Scottish population would be in favour of the legalisation ("Margo MacDonald launches bill to legalise assisted suicide", The Herald, January 22). Those pushing the bill cite various opinion polls to back up this claim.

A closer look at such polls reveals the figures may be contradictory and require some explanation.

A poll published in September last year indicated that 52% of people in Scotland were against the legalisation of assisted suicide, compared with 42% in favour. This was after being asked whether, in principle, they thought that it should be legal or illegal to help end the life of a suicidal person.

A poll published last November indicated

that 68% of the Scottish population would agree that the law should be changed to allow doctors to help people with chronic illness who want to end their lives.

The disparity between these polls is because the questions are not a useful guide for gauging public opinion. You can get any answer you want if you ask a question the right way.

For example, nobody wants to see suffering when it could be avoided. What is often ignored by supporters of the bill is that, in all but the rarest cases, modern palliative care eliminates the suffering of terminally-ill patients. Yet questions can focus on suffering, rather than the immense ethical concern of voluntarily ending a human life.

The House of Lords authorised a special commission which published a report in 2005. The commission studied the issues

surrounding assisted dying, its social repercussions and the public's awareness of relevant information. It found that the polls used to survey people were flawed.

It noted that surveys sought to control results by swaying the responder with leading questions. Further, those seeking to push an agenda could pick and choose questions to serve a cause. Such surveys found the Lords, "may not be the ideal tool for providing understanding ... where ... the potential impact of euthanasia/Physician Assisted Suicide legislation clearly cannot be assumed".

The commission said surveys of the public needed more context and information. It was noted workers in the healthcare professions, who are more aware of the complex issues involved, communicated a great deal of caution when surveyed.

Those with greater awareness of the issues are less likely to support a change in the law.

The commission concluded that: "The levels of agreement/disagreement with the concept of euthanasia which the numerous polls record are effectively built on what might be termed a knee-jerk reaction to the simple options provided by these polls and do not form a very useful guide to public opinion as support for legislative change."

Such a massive change in the law should be the result of considered examination and not a knee-jerk reaction to leading survey questions.

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