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THE SCOTSMAN

*The Conductors pledge themselves for impartiality, firmness and independence ...
their first desire is to be honest, the second is to be useful ... the great requisites
for the task are only good sense, courage and industry*

FROM THE PROSPECTUS OF THE SCOTSMAN, 30 NOVEMBER 1816

Platform

Assisted suicide bill a Trojan horse, writes Christopher Bechtel

AMONG the hot topics facing MSPs none may be more controversial than the End of Life Assistance Bill initiated by Margo MacDonald MSP. Though presumably well-intentioned, this bill poses numerous problems for Scottish society. One problem is its vagueness.

As evidenced by its title, the bill's focus is helping people end their lives. Problematically, however, it does not stipulate whether this help is to result in assisted suicide or euthanasia. To all appearances, then, the bill somewhat radically promotes both procedures.

To the casual observer, assisted suicide and euthanasia may seem to be synonymous. But there is an important distinction, which hinges on who performs the action that ends a person's life. If the person himself swallows the prescribed drugs or flips a switch to trigger a lethal injection, we have assisted suicide. If a doctor administers the injection or, as apparently allowed by MacDonald's bill, a friend uses a pillow to smother the person, we have euthanasia.

Here the vagueness of the bill could make it a Trojan horse. While it may allow for assisted suicide, there is an overwhelming case to be made that euthanasia would quickly become the dominant procedure.

Statistics from the Netherlands, where both forms of ending life are legal, support this likelihood. For example, according to one study in 2000, 18 per cent of planned assisted suicides become euthanasia, with the attending physician performing the killing act at the last minute, often because of complications.

The step from assisted suicide to euthanasia is technically very small. Once we accept that state-sanctioned suicide is appropriate, we have only to blink before we authorise the state itself to end lives.

Hundreds of qualified medical personnel, politicians, lawyers, professors and ordinary citizens concur that neither assisted suicide nor euthanasia should have a place in Scotland. If we are not vigilant and principled, they will.

● *Christopher Bechtel is a board member of the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics*