

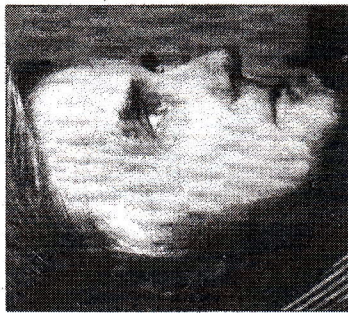
'To function consistently, society must reject assisted suicide ...'

THE SURVEY of over-50s concerning the proposed legalisation of assisted suicide in Scotland, as stated in the Southern Reporter of April 8, is unlikely to represent the widespread opinion in the region. As was noted in the article, a total of 144 returns is insufficient to draw such conclusions.

Moreover, the House of Lords warned in a report relating to assisted suicide, published in April 2005, that there is a lot of concern that even professional polls currently used to survey the people are fundamentally flawed.

This is because surveys conducted in this manner seek to control results by influencing the responder with leading questions. Further, those seeking to push their own agendas can pick and choose whichever questions will best serve their particular cause.

The House of Lords report concluded that research of this nature, which is quantitative rather than qualitative, fails to take into account the "complex and sensitive issues" at stake



Richard Baillie, pictured, a member of the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics, looks at the points raised by recent discussions on the complex and sensitive issue

closer their experience of end-of-life patients, the less sure the professionals are about the prospect of a change in the law in favour of euthanasia."

The commission concludes: "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."

Questions can also be asked concerning Margo MacDonald's bill in the Scottish Parliament relating to the identity of those who take part in and supervise an assisted suicide.

Moreover, her suggestion that the bill would alleviate sufferers from their distress is

inaccurate. Indeed, physical suffering can be adequately alleviated in all but the rarest of cases with up to 95 per cent of patients having their pain and/or symptoms effectively relieved when treated by healthcare professionals with the relevant expertise.

Unfortunately, there will always be rare occasions where a patient's symptoms cannot be completely controlled. Often these are patients who cannot cope with their condition, such as severe breathlessness. Some may also have significant psychological and/or spiritual distress which they find difficult to resolve. Indeed, almost all patients with symptoms which cannot be completely controlled have elements of this distress which is not recognised as physical.

These individuals may then request some form of sedation

to relieve the burden of such suffering, in which case it may be possible to manage their distress and agitation without side effects.

Frequently, the manner in which the term "dignity" is used, instead of self-respect, by those in favour of euthanasia, undermines the far more fundamental form of intrinsic dignity.

It is incorrect and disturbing to suggest that any person can ever lose his or her intrinsic human dignity. This is in accordance with the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights which affirms in its preamble "the inherent dignity and ... the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family" as "the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world".

We live in a society where

human dignity is universal and where each and every person is expected to acknowledge, respect and recognise the same dignity in other individuals. It cannot be created, modified or destroyed by an individual, a majority or a state.

However, legalising assisted suicide would mean that society would accept that some individuals can actually lose their inherent human dignity and have lives which no longer have any worth, meaning or value.

This is in complete opposition to a responsible benevolent and compassionate society which continues to affirm and defend the lives of all its members and the notion that every human life is full of value, meaning and richness even though persons may be aged, or dependent on others or may have lost their autonomy.

Therefore, in order to function consistently, society must reject the option of assisted suicide if it does not want to undermine basic and fundamental societal values.