

Scottish society must allow people to expect decent life and death

Can we really apply 'euthanasia' for dogs' example to humans?



by **Patrick Harvie**
Scottish Green Party
co-convenor

This issue of assisted suicide has been debated many times in both Scottish and UK parliaments.

There has been a clear shift in public opinion on the matter.

A significant majority of the Scottish electorate, 69% according to a poll conducted last year, support the bill and over 70% of responses to Holyrood's health committee consultation were supportive.

The committee took evidence on the revised bill that I brought forward following the sad loss of Margo MacDonald. The aim of a legal framework for people to take control at the end of their life builds on

Margo's previous attempt, the End of Life Assistance bill.

The current proposals address previous concerns.

The committee took evidence from a range of witnesses, from legal and medical professionals to care specialists, faith and campaigning groups and disability organisations.

"People facing the end of their lives should have the right to take control"

I also gave evidence and MSPs are likely to vote on the principles of the bill in the next month or so.

The principle is the most important thing - people facing the end of their lives should have the right to take control if that is what they want.

I'm sure this can be done with adequate safeguards to

protect the right of those who don't want to do so.

The bill has broad support in Scottish society, from politicians, religious and legal figures to secular groups and members of the public.

It is limited to those with terminal or life-shortening condition and no one who benefits financially can be involved.

It would be for the individual to decide, through a sequence of discussions with their doctor, and, in the end, it would be the individual who would take the drugs that would end their life.

Relatives would be prohibited from witnessing any of the statements that a patient must provide and if a doctor thought that relatives were intimidating a patient they would refuse to endorse the process.

Parliament has a chance to reflect public opinion, clarify the law and provide a choice that we should all have. We expect a decent life and we should expect a decent death.

The second problem with the "euthanasia for dogs" example is that human beings are not just animals.

Of course, an argument can be made that human individuals should be able to ask for their lives, or the lives of their sick relatives, to be ended out of compassion in a similar way to that of loving dog owners in veterinary clinics when their pet has lost any hope of recovery.

But human beings have always been considered as having a special worth and value in all societies of the world - a value and worth which is different to that of all other animals.

Contrary to the rest of the animal kingdom, human beings also consider each person in a civilised society as having an inherent worth and value which cannot be diminished or lost.

Civilised human society is not a jungle where the

strongest individuals prevail at the expense of the weakest in a survival competition of the fittest.

Instead, it is a society where many of our taxes and other charitable donations are used to help the lives of everyone in a spirit of compassion and solidarity.

No matter how young or old, able or disabled, sick or healthy, close to or far from death a person is, he or she is still considered to be equal in worth and dignity by Scottish society, including by the Scottish Parliament.

This is the reason why free and democratic elections exist in Scotland and medical treatment on the NHS is available to all.

Without this equality between all human beings, the whole of civilised society would collapse.

● Dr Calum MacKellar, director of research at the Scottish Council on Human Bioethics

by **Dr Calum MacKellar**
of the
Scottish Council
on Human Bioethics



Is it right to keep a human person alive, who is suffering, when we would not even treat a dog in such a way?

This is a question that will be discussed when the Assisted Suicide Bill is considered in the Scottish Parliament before the end of May.

One of the main problems, however, with the "euthanasia for dogs" example is the mistaken belief that people are actually dying in excruciating physical suffering in Scotland.

In reality, physical suffering can be adequately alleviated in all but the rarest of cases when treated by healthcare professionals with relevant expertise.