

JANUARY 2015

**ASSISTED
DYING**

**ANWAR
ODURO-KWARTENG**



**DEBATING MATTERS
TOPIC
GUIDES**

www.debatingmatters.com

MOTION:

**“PHYSICIAN
ASSISTED SUICIDE
SHOULD BE
LEGALISED”**

ABOUT DEBATING MATTERS

Debating Matters because ideas matter. This is the premise of the Institute of Ideas Debating Matters Competition for sixth form students which emphasises substance, not just style, and the importance of taking ideas seriously. Debating Matters presents schools with an innovative and engaging approach to debating, where the real-world debates and a challenging format, including panel judges who engage with the students, appeal to students from a wide range of backgrounds, including schools with a long tradition of debating and those with none.

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KEY TERMS

[Assisted Suicide](#)

[Autonomy](#)

[Euthanasia](#)

INTRODUCTION

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On the 5th of June 2014, the Assisted Dying Bill passed its first reading in the House of Lords [Ref: [BBC News](#)]. Potentially, this set in motion a process which could mean that within two years, terminally ill patients with less than six months to live, will be able to obtain medication from a physician to end their life [Ref: [House of Lords](#)]. Supporters claim that assisted suicide must be legalised because it is compassionate, and will give the terminally ill the choice to end their: "...intolerable suffering, which cannot be relieved by palliative care" [Ref: [Independent](#)]. And many note that the law as it currently stands, fails to give people any choice in how or when they want to end their life, sometimes resulting in them taking extreme measures which fail to afford them the dignity they are entitled to [Ref: [Independent](#)]. Others however, have moral reservations about enacting a change in the law. They argue that it would fundamentally change our relationship with death and dying, concluding that legalising assisted suicide: "...brutalises society, because the loss of respect for life diminishes the life of every person" [Ref: [The Times](#)]. Opinion on this emotive subject is sharply polarised, with important moral questions of individual autonomy and choice, clashing with concerns about the wider societal consequences of formally involving the State and doctors in the suicide of individuals. Will legalising assisted suicide for the terminally ill mark the top of a slippery slope, and set a precedent with worrying consequences for us all? Or is it an enlightened and compassionate attempt to give choice to the dying, allowing them to end their lives with dignity and without pain? Should we legalise physician assisted suicide?



THE ASSISTED DYING DEBATE IN CONTEXT

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What would a change in the law mean?

It is important to distinguish between euthanasia and assisted suicide in this debate – with euthanasia pertaining to a doctor directly administering drugs to end a patient’s life [Ref: [NHS](#)]. The Assisted Suicide Bill would not legalise this - rather, it would make it possible for a physician to prescribe drugs for the patient to take themselves, after it is determined that they have less than 6 months to live, and after their mental health has been assessed by two doctors (one of them independent) [Ref: [House of Lords](#)]. As the law currently stands in the UK, both euthanasia and assisted suicide are illegal, with euthanasia punishable by life imprisonment, and assisted suicide illegal under the 1961 Suicide Act and punishable by up to 14yrs in prison [Ref: [NHS](#)]. Practically speaking, changing the law would mean that: “A person who provides any assistance in accordance with this Act shall not be guilty of an offence” [Ref: [House of Lords](#)]. Opponents caution that the law would: “Create a new moral landscape” [Ref: [Guardian](#)], and question whether its benefit to a small number people is worthwhile. Whilst supporters argue that it is an important step towards humanising the process of death, pointing to the success of a similar law in the American State of Oregon [Ref: [Oregon.Gov](#)].

Sanctity of life Vs dignity in death

For Desmond Tutu, a change in the law would not degrade of the sanctity of human life, but instead, would recognise the right of individuals to have: “...autonomy and dignity” in death [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. Furthermore, other advocates suggest that ultimately, it is about choice – giving those who want the option to end their

lives when they are terminally ill, the ability to do so, with one broadsheet editorial stating that: “Arguably, those who don’t opt for assisted dying are strengthened by the knowledge that should their suffering become intolerable, they could end their lives if they choose” [Ref: [Observer](#)]. Others are critical of these claims however, stating that legalising assisted suicide legitimates the idea that some lives are of less value than others. Academic Dr Kevin Yuill for instance compares the death penalty with assisted suicide, and suggests that morally they are no different – both diminish the sanctity of life. “ If we are to place value on even the most wretched of human lives – an important marker of civilisation – neither the death penalty or assisted suicide can be justified” [Ref: [Independent](#)] he argues. In addition, Justin Welby Archbishop of Canterbury, questions the understanding of compassion by advocates of assisted suicide, arguing that instead of relieving people of suffering, compassion is actually: “...a commitment to sharing in the suffering of others...(and) offering hope, even in the darkest of circumstances” [Ref: [The Times](#)]. There are also worries in some quarters about the role of doctors in the process, with Melanie Phillips arguing that a change in the law would: “...turn doctors into executioners” [Ref: [The Times](#)], with one poll suggesting that only 29% of doctors supported assisted suicide [Ref: [The Times](#)].

A Slippery Slope?

Although 69% of the public think the law should be changed to allow assisted suicide of the terminally ill [Ref: [YouGov](#)], Melanie McDonagh, argues that the proposals amount to: “...an open door, waiting to be pushed open further” [Ref: [Spectator](#)], a worry that many opponents of the proposed law



THE ASSISTED DYING DEBATE IN CONTEXT CONTINUED...

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have. Some point to the recent law which legalises euthanasia for children in Belgium, 11 years after the same law was passed for adults [Ref: [Telegraph](#)] as evidence of where legislation in this area can eventually lead to. Others are anxious about the message it sends out to the disabled or mentally ill, with one campaigner outlining that in time, it could be used to justify the assisted suicide of other vulnerable groups [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)], because the new law suggests that: “Life that doesn’t meet certain conditions, is worthy of no respect at all” [Ref: [The Times](#)]. However, although supporters are mindful of the ethical problems involved in the discussion, and caution that: “Gradualism...is warranted” [Ref: [Economist](#)], they nonetheless disagree with the slippery slope arguments employed by critics. As evidence, Professor Raymond Tallis cites the American state of Oregon which passed the Death With Dignity Act 17 years ago, and yet the proportion of deaths which are physician assisted has never been more than 0.25% of deaths in that time [Ref: [Independent](#)]. And columnist Polly Toynbee states that arguments about the uncertainty of where the changes could lead are used inappropriately in this case, because: “Everything is a potential slippery slope to somewhere: the law is there to define precisely how far, and no further” [Ref: [Guardian](#)]. So, will legalising physician assisted suicide fundamentally change the way in which society views death and dying, and does this have repercussions for vulnerable groups such as the elderly and disabled? Or is it an important step in recognising the autonomy of the individual, because: “...any meaningful right to life entails the right to choose how we die” [Ref: [Huffington Post](#)].



ESSENTIAL READING

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Oregon Death with Dignity Act 1997

Oregon.Gov

Assisted Dying Bill

House of Lords

FOR

Easeful Death

Economist 19 July 2014

Why we should allow assisted dying: compassion, safety and choice

Raymond Tallis *Independent* 17 July 2014

Believe in the sanctity of life? Then legalise the right to die

Carol Midgley *The Times* 16 July 2014

A dignified death is a right: I'm in favour of assisted dying

Desmond Tutu *Guardian* 12 July 2014

AGAINST

Assisted dying would turn doctors into executioners

Kevin Yuill *Independent* 18 July 2014

Safeguard Life

Guardian 17 July 2014

Lord Carey is wrong: assisted dying is anti-Christian

Tim Stanley *Telegraph* 12 July 2014

Assisted dying transforms doctors into killers

Melanie Phillips *The Times* 7 July 2014

ORGANISATIONS

Dignity in Dying



BACKGROUNDERS

Assisted suicide is an act of kindness we all might need

Polly Toynbee *Guardian* 7 November 2014

Seizing some control

Economist 19 October 2014

Falconer Bill: A step in the right direction

Pavan Dhawali *Huffington Post* 18 July 2014

Life and death

The Times 18 July 2014

5 reasons the Assisted dying Bill is long overdue

Kieran Turner-Dave *Huffington Post* 17 July 2014

Assisted dying: This Bill has so many flaws I don't know where to start

Tanni Grey-Thompson *Telegraph* 17 July 2014

Give me the right to live, not die

Simon Stevens *Huffington Post* 15 July 2014

Helping people to die is not truly compassionate

Justin Welby *The Times* 12 July 2014

George Carey's thoughtless contribution to the assisted dying debate

Melanie McDonagh *Spectator* 12 July 2014

Assisted dying: change the law so the terminally ill can die with dignity

Observer 12 July 2014

YouGov Poll

YouGov 6 July 2014

Assisted dying is the final triumph of market capitalism

Giles Fraser *Guardian* 4 July 2014

The State should not be the God of death

Jon Holbrook *spiked* 3 July 2014

Moral Law

The Times 26 June 2014

Why I'm opposed to assisted suicide

Matthew Parris *The Times* 1 August 2009

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IN THE NEWS

Terminally ill euthanasia activist dies aged 29

Independent 3 November 2014

'Assisted dying Bill 'unethical and uncontrollable'

BBC News 22 October 2014

Right to die campaigners daughter: The law does not need to be changed

Telegraph 20 October 2014

Right to die: Grandmother starves herself to death as the law left her 'with no alternative'

Independent 19 October 2014

More than 300 terminally ill patients commit suicide per year

Telegraph 15 October 2014

'Death squads' of doctors may be needed to handle assisted suicide

The Times 23 August 2014

1 in 5 visitors to Swiss right to die clinics from Britain

Guardian 20 August 2014

Assisted dying Bill would lessen suffering says Lord Falconer

BBC News 18 July 2014

David Cameron 'not convinced' by assisted dying Bill

Guardian 16 July 2014

Belgium to legalise euthanasia for children

Telegraph 12 February 2014

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AUDIO/VISUAL

Assisted dying Bill passes first political hurdle

BBC News 19 July 2014



ADVICE FOR DEBATING MATTERS



FOR STUDENTS

READ EVERYTHING

In the Topic Guide and in the news - not just your side of the argument either.

STATISTICS ARE GOOD BUT.....

Your opponents will have their own too. They'll support your points but they aren't a substitute for them.

BE BOLD

Get straight to the point but don't rush into things: make sure you aren't falling back on earlier assertions because interpreting a debate too narrowly might show a lack of understanding or confidence.

DON'T BACK DOWN

Try to take your case to its logical conclusion before trying to seem 'balanced' - your ability to challenge fundamental principles will be rewarded - even if you personally disagree with your arguments.

DON'T PANIC

Never assume you've lost because every question is an opportunity to explain what you know. Don't try to answer every question but don't avoid the tough ones either.

FOR TEACHERS

Hoping to start a debating club? Looking for ways to give your debaters more experience? Debating Matters have a wide range of resources to help develop a culture of debate in your school and many more Topic Guides like this one to bring out the best in your students. For these and details of how to enter a team for the Debating Matters Competition visit our website, www.debatingmatters.com

FOR JUDGES

Judges are asked to consider whether students have been brave enough to address the difficult questions asked of them. Clever semantics might demonstrate an acrobatic mind but are also likely to hinder a serious discussion by changing the terms and parameters of the debate itself.

Whilst a team might demonstrate considerable knowledge and familiarity with the topic, evading difficult issues and failing to address the main substance of the debate misses the point of the competition. Judges are therefore encouraged to consider how far students have gone in defending their side of the motion, to what extent students have taken up the more challenging parts of the debate and how far the teams were able to respond to and challenge their opponents.

As one judge remarked *'These are not debates won simply by the rather technical rules of schools competitive debating. The challenge is to dig in to the real issues.'* This assessment seems to grasp the point and is worth bearing in mind when sitting on a judging panel.



**“A COMPLEX
WORLD REQUIRES
THE CAPACITY
TO MARSHALL
CHALLENGING IDEAS
AND ARGUMENTS”**

**LORD BOATENG, FORMER BRITISH HIGH
COMMISSIONER TO SOUTH AFRICA**