

Dying with Dignity Bill

— The Time Is Now

Alan Tuffery

THE Dying With Dignity Bill is now before the Oireachtas. Its provisions apply to anyone over the age of 18 resident on ‘the island of Ireland.’ If passed, it will raise some problems in Northern Ireland because no part of the UK has a dying with dignity law, although active debates are in progress.

In this article, I argue that the time is right for the enactment of this Bill because of the rate of social change in Ireland. Even since the Dying With Dignity Bill was first presented in 2015, Ireland has continued the pattern of change of the last few decades. Ireland was a country in which one narrow framework applied to everyone. Now it has become a more compassionate society which recognises diversity; a society that increasingly recognises that different people have different needs.

The Republic of Ireland has had two momentous referendums. First, the 2015 marriage equality referendum and then the 2018 referendum to repeal the 8th amendment to the Constitution which prohibited abortion. Both were passed very comfortably and reflect the continuing shift in Irish society towards a society which recognises and respects a higher level of individual autonomy. It is no longer a case of one rule for everyone. Individuals may take the decisions that are best for them, in terms of their ‘most cherished values and beliefs’ — a key part of the concept of personal autonomy.

The common theme here is compassion — society’s compassion for individuals and our compassion for one another. Both lead us to a desire to live in a kinder world and to reduce suffering.

The Dying with Dignity Bill aims to allow individuals with a terminal illness to be helped to end their suffering. At present we do not grant to our fellow citizens the same merciful end to suffering that we grant to the animals in our care.

Laws like the Dying with Dignity Bill are in place in many jurisdictions. In recent times, over thirty countries have legalised some form of voluntary assisted dying, so that, in effect, over 200 million people worldwide now have a legal provision that allows them to end their suffering at the end of life.

Some jurisdictions have only recently passed their laws on voluntary assisted dying. This means that detailed recent arguments are available to us many times over and

can speed up our discussions. How many times do we need to hear the same arguments and the same evidence before we are convinced.

Some jurisdictions have had laws on voluntary assisted dying for well over 20 years now. This means that there is a great deal of experience of operating the safeguards and the procedures. We do not have to start from scratch in Ireland. We can learn from the experience of other jurisdictions and adapt existing procedures to suit our society.

International experience shows that when individuals with a terminal illness know that voluntary assisted dying is available to them, their quality of life is greatly improved. It removes much stress and anxiety, both for themselves and for their loved ones. It provides an

‘emotional insurance’ — as it has been called — that allows them to live out the life that remains to them, without the fear of great pain outside their control. They are also free of the emotional pain that comes with knowing that those who care for them and for whom they care will not have to watch

them die in suffering and degradation.

This ‘emotional insurance’ also removes any need for the terminally ill person to consider suicide — a lonely thought because, in principle, any discussion with others might implicate them in the serious crime of ‘assisting a suicide’. If they decide to travel to end their lives — a complicated and expensive business — they may have to do so alone and may have to end their lives early while they still have some decent quality of life left. It is time to end the practice of ‘exporting our problems’. We have been doing that for far too long.

In every country where voluntary assisted dying is available, surveys show that it is massively popular among the population at large. In no case has such legislation been repealed.

Voluntary assisted dying works. Surveys here show that Irish people support the policy. Now is the time to enact appropriate legislation in Ireland and end suffering for the terminally ill, and the people who care about them.

(Alan Tuffery is a member of the End of Life Ireland (EOLI), a voluntary organisation aiming to foster conversations about end of life and to support the Dying With Dignity Bill. This article was based on a presentation to an EOLI event in early April). □