

## **‘How did we get to assisted suicide rather than alleviation of pain being the solution?’**



My aunt and uncle travelled several hundred miles this week to attend the funeral of a former neighbour, who lived next door to them for 25 years. Delving into a box of old photographs, I found a picture of them when they moved into their brand new homes in the 1950s: newly married couples, full of hope, the bloom of youth on their faces.

They ended their days, though, very differently. My uncle and aunt have enjoyed the old age for which we all long: still mobile, independent and full of zest for life. But their neighbour endured dementia in her last years, and could not stay in her own home. She did, however, have a loving family to care for her. Her daughter became sandwiched between CATHERINE PEPINSTER her own children and trying to look after her mother at home plus the endless round of doctors, hospital appointments, social-services visits. One can imagine how easy it might be for those needing such care to think that the time has come to end their days. That is the risk, the slippery slope down which society might well slide if euthanasia became legal.

A highly effective group of lobbyists are continually pressing for the law to be changed and this week their case was put forward on a BBC documentary presented by the author, Sir Terry Pratchett. Sir Terry's arguments are given emotive force by the fact that he has Alzheimer's disease and will himself become physically incapacitated by his illness.

It is clear that the focus of the campaign for assisted suicide are those with bodily limitations who want the guarantee of help to die when they cannot kill themselves. It was noticeable in this week's film that while the campaign often refers to helping those who are terminally ill, the people featured had an incurable condition rather than, say, cancer. No wonder, then, that a survey commissioned by the disability charity Scope reveals that 70 per cent of disabled people fear that a change in the law would lead to pressure on them to end their lives prematurely.

Those who argue in favour of assisted suicide always mention the pain and discomfort of the sick as reasons for it, and nobody opposed to assisted suicide should disregard the physical and mental suffering that many people endure. But how did we get to the situation where assisted suicide rather than alleviation of pain is the solution?

One might say it was down to a growing emphasis on our autonomy, a declining belief in the divine and therefore the sanctity of life, even economics. Care for the profoundly disabled, the elderly and the incurably sick is enormously expensive. But there is something else as well, to which my box of photographs gives a clue. Too many of us look at a photograph of someone in their twenties and thirties and see that as the real person, as if someone in old age is a sort of living ghost. A person who is disabled, who looks different from others, is all too often perceived as not quite the full ticket either.

We have a template of the ideal human person and those who fit it to perfection – the model, the athlete, the film star – are our idols, while those who don't – the old, the child with Down's, the adult with cerebral palsy – are treated as second-rate. A hand of alabaster skin, with perfectly manicured nails, is revered; the knobbly, mottled hand of the aged is not. We become blind to someone else's humanity.

That blindness was evident in a recent Panorama programme, exposing the defilement in a care home of disabled people. Like the elderly, many of those with physical and mental disabilities are tidied away in care homes, out of sight and looked after by low-paid workers.

Society has also tidied away death. Where once infant mortality and shorter lives meant there was greater exposure to it, nowadays people can often be well into middle age before they ever attend a funeral. Despite the efforts of hospices, dying is all too often a hospital process, surrounded by wires and screens, rather than a normal part of life.

We Catholics are fortunate: there are constant reminders, whether through saying the "Hail Mary" or listening to bidding prayers marking deaths and their anniversaries, that death is a natural, inevitable part of our lives. For others, it is a time to be feared, a frightening taboo, which is only bearable if they can choose its time and place. And that taboo, along with the totem of physical perfection, is driving society's attitudes to relaxing its approach to euthanasia.

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