Legalising assisted dying does not affect palliative care, says US expert

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University, said that promoting the use of generic medicines would help governments to contain drug expenditure at a time when the rate of spending on medicines is growing faster than the economies of the EU.

Jane Burgermeister Vienna


Legalising assisted dying does not affect palliative care, says expert

The US state of Oregon's legalisation on assisted dying has in no way affected the high standards of palliative care in the state, according to Ann Jackson, visiting head of the Oregon Hospice Association.

She was speaking at a press conference in London held by the campaigning organisation Dignity in Dying, before a House of Lords debate on 12 May on the Joffe Bill to legalise doctor assisted suicide in the United Kingdom (BMJ 2005;331:1160, 19 Nov).

Ms Jackson said, "Oregon's law was implemented in 1997, and in the eight years since, palliative care has not suffered as some forecast."

Ms Jackson said that since the introduction of the Oregon law, only 246 patients have died as a result of doctor assisted suicide. She added that only 1 in 250 people who considered the option were ultimately prescribed the lethal medication and only 1 in 20 of these people went on to use the medication.

Balaji Ravichandran BMJ

Bird flu adds to Sudan's woes

As the Darfur crisis spilled over into Chad this month, a United Nations' official warned that relief operations could collapse within weeks or months because of violence and intimidation, restrictions on aid staff, and lack of funding. Sudanese militias have reportedly been attacking a refugee camp, and Khartoum is accused of backing a rebel attack on Ndjamena, the capital of Chad. Meanwhile, news that bird flu had arrived in a country in such chaos prompted further concern.

Guido Salatizelli, the World Health Organization's representative in Sudan, told the BMJ, "As a result of the current humanitarian crisis in Darfur and the effect of over 20 years of civil war, the health situation in Sudan is facing many challenges. The confirmation of avian influenza in poultry in Sudan is an added concern to public health."

Jan Egeland, the UN's head of humanitarian affairs, cautioned the Sudanese government that donors were unlikely to continue funding an operation that consumed a third of the UN's humanitarian budget unless there was better cooperation.

Peter Moszynski London


UK has inadequate services for victims of sexual assault

Some UK centres for victims of sexual assault are served by so few doctors that they cannot provide 24 hour cover, research has found (Journal of Clinical Forensic Medicine 2006;13:164-71). The researchers examined the services offered to complainants of sexual assault in the United Kingdom in 2005 and found inadequate numbers of forensic doctors available for examining child victims and almost no services for young children who have been sexually assaulted.

Some centres report a high risk of contamination of samples taken for DNA testing: many do not offer screening for sexually transmitted infections; and cooperative working with local health services is lacking, says the report.

"The picture is one of a very disparate service. There is no consistency across the country," say the study's authors, Mary Pillai from Cheltenham General Hospital and Sheila Paul from Buckinghamshire.

Roger Dobson Abergavenny

Doctors charged with ensuring dignity for older patients

Adrian O'Dowd London

Doctors and other NHS staff in England will be subject to closer scrutiny to ensure they are treating older patients with greater dignity and respect, the government has been announced.

The government said last week that it intended to make dignity for older people a priority and was asking the NHS watchdog—the Healthcare Commission—to expand its inspections to include dignity.

Unveiling the second five year phase of its national service framework for older people—the government's plan to improve services for older people in England—health minister Liam Byrne said: "Dignity is everybody's business. So we'll be asking watchdogs, nurses, doctors, and newly appointed older people's champions to join together with one goal—to make dignity in care a priority."

The government also intends to have at least one named nurse in every hospital who will have responsibility for ensuring that older patients are treated with respect and to root out age discrimination.

Mr Byrne also launched a report detailing the progress made since the framework was launched in 2001. That report's author, Professor Ian Philp, the Department of Health's national director for older people, said a lot had been achieved so far, including:

• A 100% rise in breast screening for women over 65
• More hip replacements and cataract operations

• A reduction in delayed discharge from acute hospitals of more than two thirds
• Better stroke services—all hospitals that care for stroke patients now have a specialised stroke service.

Professor Philp, also an honorary consultant physician at the Northern General Hospital in Sheffield, said that "deep rooted negative attitudes and behaviours" towards older people persisted.

He added that inspection bodies such as the Healthcare Commission and the Commission for Social Care Inspection would be encouraged to view breaches of older people's dignity as just as serious a failing as missing a waiting time target. Patients would also be encouraged to complain more if they felt they had been treated hardly by staff.

The government also plans to reactivate the Older People's Champions Network, which was disbanded last year as the government felt it had achieved its aims. The network had around 1800 members who were keen to improve older people's services.

Jamie Rentoul, head of strategy at the Healthcare Commission, said: "NHS trusts must have effective arrangements in place to ensure that patients are treated with dignity and respect. We will hold trusts to account for their performance."

A New Ambition for Old Age: Next Steps in Implementing the National Service Framework for Older People is at www.dh.gov.uk.

"Dignity is everybody's business," said health minister Liam Byrne.