

26th June 2015

Dear Constituents,

Thank you for contacting me about assisted suicide.

I appreciate your concern on this very sensitive issue. Coping with terminal illness is distressing and difficult both for patients and their families. These cases are truly moving and evoke the highest degree of compassion and emotion.

Assisting or encouraging suicide is a criminal offence under Section 2 of the Suicide Act 1961 for which the maximum penalty is 14 years' imprisonment. I am aware that the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) has published guidelines primarily concerned with advising the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) prosecutors about the factors which they need to consider when deciding whether it is in the public interest to prosecute a person for assisting or encouraging another to commit suicide.

The House of Commons has discussed the DPP's guidelines and these were unanimously commended as being a compassionate and measured way of dealing with one of the most emotionally-charged crimes in the statute book. However, they do not change the law. Assisting or encouraging suicide has not been decriminalised.

The DPP has now further clarified the CPS policy on the likelihood of prosecution of health care professionals, to specify that the relationship of care will be the important aspect and it will be necessary to consider whether the suspect may have been in a position to exert some influence on the victim.

I believe the application of the law should be flexible enough to distinguish the facts and the circumstances of one case from another. To this end, the DPP's policy offers important and sensitive guidance.

I fully accept that suicide, assisting or encouraging suicide, assisted dying and euthanasia are all subjects on which it is entirely possible for people to hold widely different but defensible opinions. This is why the substance of the law in this area is not a matter of party politics but of conscience. Should the law in this area ever be altered, it is neither a matter for Government to decide nor a matter for the judiciary, but ultimately a matter for Parliament and therefore it would be a free vote.

Everyone would agree that terminally ill patients should receive the highest quality palliative support and end-of-life care, and that they and their families should be certain that their end-of-life care will meet all of their needs. With that in mind, I welcome the Department of Health's End of Life Care Strategy which is intended to improve access to good quality palliative care and encourage the Government further to develop specialist palliative care and hospice provision.

Alok Sharma, MP for Reading West

One of my main concerns about any proposals to introduce assisted dying is for the vulnerable and the frail elderly who could, in certain circumstances, find themselves placed in an impossible position if there was a wholesale change in the law. I believe in the sanctity of life and certainly do not want to live in a society where people feel pressured to take their own lives because they might feel like a burden. I do have a great deal of sympathy for those people with terminal illnesses who want to end their own suffering, but I remain sceptical about legalising assisted dying because of the difficulties in ensuring there are effective safeguards to prevent abuse.

Thank you, once again, for taking the time to contact me.

Yours sincerely,



Alok Sharma MP