

Assisted dying/assisted suicide: Too many “complicating factors” to be safely implemented, says British public in new poll

- 56 per cent of those who express an opinion (71 percent of all those surveyed) support legalising assisted dying/assisted suicide (AD/AS) in principle but feel there are too many complicating factors to make it a practical and safe option to implement in Britain.
- A majority feel that if AD/AS is legalised in the UK, patients should have the legal right to choose to be treated by doctors and other health professionals who have opted out of participating in it.
- Legalising AD/AS is not a political priority for most people. Legalising AD/AS ranked 23 out of 24 of issues that need attention, with “regulating AI” and “international trade deals” ranking higher. Only four per cent thought it should be a priority for politicians.
- 60 per cent of those surveyed worried that legalizing AD/AS would fundamentally change the relationship between doctor and patient, including more than half (51 per cent) of those who support AD/AS

Assisted dying/assisted suicide has too many “complicating factors” to be implemented safely, says the British public in a major new poll.

The poll, of more than 2,000 British adults, by British Polling Council member Whitestone Insight, finds that behind the headline figures of support for AD/AS, the public expressed ambivalence about its consequences and signalled serious doubts.

The poll, commissioned by the think tank Living & Dying Well (LDW) and released just ahead of a new attempt in the House of Lords to change the law, also found:

- Seven in 10 (70 per cent) said that assistance in dying in countries like Canada and the Netherlands, where young people with no terminal illness are helped to die, has gone too far. This rose to more than eight in 10 (84 per cent) when those who answered ‘don’t know’ were discounted.
- Young people reject AD/AS more than do any other age group. Fewer than half (44 per cent) of 18–24-year-olds supported legalising AD/AS.
- A clear majority – 56 per cent – voiced fears that legalising AD/AS would lead to a culture where suicide becomes more normalised than it is today. This rose to 67 per cent when those who answered “don’t know” were omitted.
- Similarly, 43 per cent fear that introducing AD/AS when the NHS and Social Care budget is under such pressure would inevitably place an incentive on health professionals to encourage some people to end their lives early.

Four in ten people (41 per cent) are concerned that introducing AD/AS when the NHS is under such strain would “inevitably” risk funding for palliative care services.

The survey was conducted in the wake of comments made by a handful of politicians, who wrongly believe the public are broadly supportive of changing the law to legalise assisted suicide and euthanasia. It is being released on the eve of the first reading of a new bill in House of Lords. It pushes back against the narrative frequently promoted by those who say the public support a change in the law and highlights the serious concerns of ordinary people that need to be considered by parliamentarians ahead of any future discussion.

The poll shows that support for AD/AS suicide amongst the public changes when confronted with evidence from where it is legal. Nearly half (47 per cent), for instance, worried that people in places where it is legal opt for AD/AS because they feel they are a burden. Of those expressing any opinion this concern rose to 59 per cent of those who said they support AD/AS.

Half (50 per cent) of those who supported it in principle think that the fact that Canada saves money with every patient euthanised was a strong argument against legalisation. A third (33 per cent) of those who support AD/AS in practice thought that the revelation that rates in Oregon – the model for the current bill – went up by 260 per cent was concerning. 40 per cent of those who had supported legalisation reconsidered when confronted with the fact that young people suffering from mental illness were euthanised in Belgium and the Netherlands.

On conscientious objection, more than three quarters (77 per cent) felt all doctors, healthcare workers, and hospices should have the right to opt out of the service. This rose to nine in 10 (89 per cent) of those who expressed an opinion.

These results run in stark contrast to previous polls on the subject that frame the debate in a simplistic way without asking people to consider what changing the law actually entails. The poll shows that the British people are increasingly suspicious of AD/AS as disturbing evidence emerges from places like Canada.

Tanni, The Baroness Grey-Thompson DBE, chair of LDW, said: “This nationally representative poll conducted under British Polling Council guidelines gives a very different snapshot of ordinary peoples’ attitude towards assisted suicide than the glossy picture presented by pro-AD/AS organisations. It shows that, at best, people are ambivalent about the prospect. And the survey shows that the more people know about the issue, the more likely they are to reject this legislation.”

ENDS

Notes to Editors:

Whitestone Insight surveyed 2001 GB adults online between 5 and 6 June 2024. Data were weighted to be representative of all adults.

Whitestone Insight is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.