

The Open University. A Debate on Assisted Suicide by Lesley Close, Dignity in Dying and Dr Kevin Yuill, University of Sunderland, Tuesday, November 21, 2017.

This seminar was the final in the Death and Dying group series of stimulating talks for 2017. Both contributors provided thought provoking discussion about assisted suicide in a lively and considered debate. That this subject is contentious is unsurprising, yet, as both Lesley and Kevin demonstrated theirs was a discussion which outlined the case for and against assisted suicide based on personal, experiential and academic testimony.

Opening up this debate, Kevin reflected on a law that places equal value on every human life and which may be challenged in the event of an assisted dying bill. Kevin suggests that the bill will become the first exception to the present moral sanction against taking human lives and by those who deem their life to be too wretched.

The value of a life is not solely assessed by the owner of that life, a fact that is reflected in our efforts to prevent suicides. To make the point, Kevin argued that at times we are not the best judge of the value of our lives, yet the proposed legislation identifies one group of people who are excused from any moral implications of suicide. Rather than focus on the emotion of 'assisted dying', Kevin argues for a consideration of the evidence – that is terminally ill people are still people who when they express a wish to die are not so different from others who are upset or depressed. Indeed, terminally ill people are also likely to suffer from undiagnosed issues such as depression making them even more vulnerable.

Everyone, with planning and determination, can kill themselves with no assistance. It might be pertinent to ask what that person really wants when they ask for assistance.

Next, Lesley joined the debate with a more personal account of the death of her brother, John who was diagnosed with Motor Neurone Disease at the age of 53. For Lesley and her brother having some control over his death brought a sense of comfort at a time when he was no longer able to swallow and his speech unintelligible unless communication was aided by the assistance of a computer. For John, assisted suicide through Dignitas would afford a more peaceful and dignified ending and Lesley was able to draw some comfort knowing John could have some control at a time when MND had eroded his dignity.

Had the legislation existed when John was alive in 2003, he may have had longer with his family and achieved a peaceful ending in the UK. Instead, he had to be well enough to undertake the journey to Dignitas – one of approximately 350 people who have ended their lives this way.

Lesley's argument centred on a legal standpoint which is that people are unable to have open conversations about assisted dying for fear of prosecution. Moreover, the current law discriminates between those who can afford the £10,000 + to make the trip and those that cannot afford to do so. Despite aiming to obtain some control and dignity, the current situation means that people make this journey overseas to end their lives sooner than they choose for fear of being unable to make it later.

There was much more to this debate than is outlined here, and it is thought provoking none the less no matter which argument you concur with. To that end, the audience too had a

great deal to say from a professional and personal stance and this demonstrated the complexity of the argument and perhaps the reason why the bill has attracted its proponents and so many arguments against it.