

Director of Public Prosecutions' consultation on assisting suicide

Archbishop Peter Smith's video message

"You will probably have seen in the papers and on television that there's a campaign going on to try and legalise assistance with suicide. What's that got to do with me, you might say? You don't want someone to help you kill yourself and you wouldn't give anyone else that kind of help either. That may be so, but there are people who do occasionally ask for that sort of help.

"Most of us have great compassion for those who come to despair of life. What they need is our love and support. But there are some people who may not have the best of motives for helping someone to kill themselves - they may be exhausted by caring for a sick or disabled relative or they may want to benefit from an inheritance or it may be one of the increasing number of cases of abuse of the elderly.

"But the fact of the matter is that the people who ask for the help to kill themselves are often depressed or worried about the burden of care they're putting on their families or carers - or about the money they are using up in nursing home fees that they would prefer to give to their children.

"At the moment people in this position are protected by the law. It's a criminal offence to assist someone's suicide and there are serious penalties for anyone who is convicted of that crime. The result is that we don't see many cases in this country: the law as it stands deters most people from doing it.

"The cases we do see tend to have a strong element of compassion in them and no evidence of coercion or abuse, and in these cases the Crown Prosecution Service – the CPS – usually exercises its discretion not to prosecute.

"But all that could be about to change. The Director of Public Prosecutions has issued draft guidelines setting out what circumstances will incline him to prosecute or not to prosecute in cases of assisted suicide.

"Though it's clearly unintended, the overall effect of these guidelines is to provide those who are tempted to assist someone to commit suicide with pointers as to how they can avoid being prosecuted. And some of the circumstances themselves are just plain objectionable.

"The Director of Public Prosecutions is having a public consultation and we have until 16 December to make our views known. The Catholic Bishops' Conference will, of course, be responding but it's also extremely important that as many people as possible give their own individual response.

"This is a really crucial issue. So do please read about it on the website: it will tell you what this is all about and how you can stop it before it gets out of control."

+Peter Smith

Archbishop of Cardiff

Chair of the Department for Christian Responsibility and Citizenship, Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales