

So you want to die? (21st March 2008)

Once again the 'awkward' subject of voluntary euthanasia has reared its' ugly head with Baroness Warlock suggesting we should have the right to have assisted suicide if we suffer from alzheimers disease.

Strangely, I get the impression from comments on the radio and in the press that approval for this 'right' increases as we get older and the possibility of the right becomes a reality. To the young, life is an adventure and the majority what to live it to the full. As old age creeps up, bits start to fall off, cease to work as well they might, responsibilities to others are reduced and the realisation that life cannot continue for ever sinks in.

Naturally, this happens at different rates and different times to all of us, but one thing I am sure of is that by the time you realise you have alzheimers disease, it's often too late to make a rational decision.

In some respects this thorny question already gets answered. I had an elderly relative who lived on her own and was 'lucky' enough to have stroke when a friend from Italy popped in (don't ask!) to see her. The friend called an ambulance and waited at the hospital until we arrived at gone 11pm.

She was assessed overnight in the A&E side ward before being transferred to the stroke unit. A couple of weeks later, she was transferred to her local community hospital. Initially, on the ground floor, but then moved to the 1st floor. A patient told us that people rarely came down again!

She spent several weeks in a ward, but as she was unable to swallow and in great pain, it seemed her only wish to be allowed to die, wasn't too much to ask at 95. After a few weeks, we found she had been moved to a single ward at the end of a corridor and within the week she was dead.

I suspect this story could be repeated in a similar fashion by many people regarding an elderly relative and I suppose the real question is whether the person should be 'helped' to die with his/her relatives and friends nearby or, in the case of my aunt, be shuffled off to a side ward and just left to die on her own.

At the time, I was very cross that no effort had been made to make her final days/hours more comfortable and wrote a letter complaining of the treatment handed out. I got the usual invitation to make an appointment to discuss my concerns but in the end considered that nothing would be gained apart from costing NHS staff time and money and did not follow up the invitation.

This is a difficult subject that does need addressing, but if we don't discuss the safeguards that must be put in place, doctors will continue to do what they feel is best rather than what the patient and relatives feel is a preferable way.

I hope this short article at least makes you think about the subject and realise that not matter what the law currently says, it happens by the back door and that can't be right.