

ABPN Position Statement on Assisted Dying & Children¹

Introduction

Assisted Dying is currently illegal in the UK. Lord Falconer of Thoroton secured a private members' bill Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults Bill (2024), which aims to offer safe, compassionate choice to dying people. The Bill had its first reading on Friday 26 July 2024 in the House of Lords and it is due for a second reading.

Kim Leadbeater MP introduced a Bill in England and Wales to allow adults who are terminally ill, subject to safeguards and protections, to request and be provided with assistance to end their own life; and for connected purposes to the House of Commons on 16 October 2024, it was debated on 29 November 2024. MPs were given a free vote (that is one in which MPs are not put under pressure as to which way to vote by their Party Whips). The MPs voted in favour of the Bill going forward to the Committee stage.

On 23 October 2024 Senedd members, including the First Minister and Health Secretary, voted against a motion calling for a new law to allow assisted dying in Wales and England. Although the Senedd does not have the power to change the law on assisted dying in Wales, the vote was symbolic.

On 27 March 2024 Liam McArthur MSP introduced a Member's Bill to allow terminally ill adults in Scotland, who are eligible, to lawfully request, and be provided with, assistance by health professionals to end their own life. To be eligible, a person needs to be assessed by two doctors as being terminally ill; be aged 16 or over; resident in Scotland for at least 12 continuous months; registered with a GP in Scotland; and have the mental capacity to make the request.

Despite the focus on adults in the Leadbetter and Falconer Bills, any change would have implications for children and young people and the professionals and services that support them, through transition to adult services. A proportion of children's services now provide care to young adults through to the age of 25.

Professional views

On 1 November 2024 the Chief Nursing Officers of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales published a joint correspondence recognising that it is appropriate and reasonable for nurses to give their opinions, but urging nurses to be guided by the professional values enshrined in our code of practice, particularly around respect and confidentiality, avoiding

- identifying individuals you have cared for unless with their consent
- directly engaging patients in debate
- implying that you speak for the nursing and midwifery professions rather than expressing your personal views

¹ Child/children – this term is used to describe infants (including neonates), children, young people and young adults

A 2020 study by the British Medical Association (BMA) showed that while 50% of doctors supported Assisted Dying only 34% said they would agree to prescribe lethal drugs. Those working in palliative medicine identified only 10% who would agree to prescribe lethal drugs. The current position of professional bodies are:

The BMA – Neutral (last updated Sept 2021)
Royal College of Physicians – Neutral (Last updated March 2019)
Royal College of Nursing – Neutral (Jul 2023)
Nursing and Midwifery Council – Neutral (Jan 2023)

Around the world

A growing number of countries permit some form of assisted dying:

Assisted Dying² – Canada (which permits voluntary euthanasia also), New Zealand, Portugal, Australia, and 10 US states.

Assisted Suicide³ – Switzerland, Austria

Voluntary Euthanasia⁴ – Canada, Luxembourg, Columbia, Belgium and The Netherlands.

In Belgium the right to voluntary euthanasia was extended to children in 2014. There is no minimum age requirement, but the law requires the child to have the ability to understand and have written consent by the parents.

The Netherlands permits it for those over the age of 12 (with parental consent for those aged 12-16). Those aged 16-18years do not need consent from their parents but the parents should be included in the decision-making process

Columbia allows euthanasia for children over 6 (with parental consent), children between 12 and 14 can access it even if their parents disagree, over 14 there is no requirement for parental involvement.

Position statement in relation to the Assisted Dying for Terminally Ill Adults

The Association of British Paediatric Nurses recognise that the views of our members will reflect a spectrum of views on assisted dying and as a membership organisation we neither support nor oppose a change in the law.

We reiterate the need to ensure that all people have the right to the best quality of life. When they have life-limiting conditions they have the right to high-quality palliative care to meet their needs.

We believe that assisted dying is not an alternative to palliative care. We call upon the UK government to ensure that funding and structures are in place to ensure universal access to palliative care, including ensuring access to appropriate pain and symptom control. For children and young people this includes:

1. Access to children's palliative care within the children's health care system.

² *Assisted Dying* – Prescribing life ending drugs for terminally ill, mentally competent adults to administer themselves after meeting strict legal safeguards.

³ *Assisted Suicide* – Prescribing life ending drugs for terminally ill, mentally competent adults and those living with long term progressive conditions to administer themselves after meeting strict legal safeguards

⁴ *Voluntary euthanasia* – A doctor directly administers life ending drugs to a patient who has given consent.

2. Access to appropriate pain and symptom management (including medications) for all children.

3. Supporting children and their families to be able to live their lives to the best of their ability for as long as possible.

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