

*From Dr Michael Irwin*

Sir, My organisation, composed of doctors who want to decriminalise the assistance which can be given to terminally ill patients who request medical help to speed up the dying process, estimates that at least 20 per cent of all deaths in the UK today are hastened. This figure is based chiefly on the findings of government-sponsored surveys in The Netherlands in 1991 and 1995, and a survey conducted by Monash University, Victoria, in 1996.

Such hastening is usually effected by withholding or withdrawing treatment (and thank goodness the BMA is attempting to prepare guidelines on this) or by giving huge dosages of painkillers or sedatives over a day or two. Occasionally and illegally, lethal drugs are prescribed or a single injection is given.

It is the fact that so many end-of-life decisions are made in secret, and may involve only one doctor, which presents the main danger of abuse. We believe there must be an open and honest inquiry about the various ways in which people die today in this country.

Then, proper procedures can be prepared involving two or more doctors, acting publicly, and always bearing in mind what the terminally ill patient really wants.

Doctor-assisted dying is legal in Oregon, and is decriminalised in The Netherlands and Switzerland. Are we in this country, so different from the Dutch, the Swiss and the residents of Oregon?

Yours faithfully,  
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Weekend letters, page 5.

*Given to Hospice  
+ Nurse H&R*