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Euthanasia: A judge warns doctors must not 'play God'

AS HISTORY was being rewritten last week with the revelation that King George V's death was hastened with drugs injected by his physician, a High Court judge restated the British judiciary's views on the illegality of euthanasia, whether with or without the patient's consent.

Mr Justice Mars-Jones declared: "A doctor is not entitled to play God and cut short life because the time has come to end the pain and suffering and to enable his patient to 'die with dignity'."

But despite a summing-up clearly hostile to the defence case, a jury at Leeds crown court yesterday cleared a family doctor of trying to kill a terminally ill cancer patient with an overdose of drugs. The defence claimed that the overdose was "a ghastly mistake".

The jury decided by a majority verdict that Dr John Douglas Carr, 59, was not guilty of attempted murder in

by Neville Hodgkinson
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Mars-Jones: law to the end having administered the overdose, given to 63-year-old Ronald Mawson.

In his summing-up, Mars-Jones told the jury that the patient did not want to die, and even if he did, killing him would have been illegal. "However gravely ill a man may be, however near his death he is, he is entitled in

our law to every hour, nay every minute of life that God has granted him.

"That hour or hours may be the most precious and most important hours of a man's life. There may be business to transact, gifts to be given, forgivenesses to be said, attitudes to be expressed, farewells to be made, 101 bits of unfinished business which have to be concluded."

During the 14-day hearing the prosecution alleged that Carr had given the cancer patient 1,000 milligrams instead of 150 milligrams of the drug phenobarbitone to "let him die with dignity".

After the jury, seemingly determined not to brand the doctor as a criminal, returned its verdict yesterday, the judge refused to grant costs to the defence.

Carr said later through his solicitor: "I have tried to serve at all times the best interests of my patients."

The jury's verdict came two

days after it was revealed by the biographer Francis Watson that in 1936 a fatal dose of morphia and cocaine was given to George V to bring about a "brief final scene".

Those revelations, along with the Leeds case, add urgency to a current review by the British Medical Association of the guidelines it issues to doctors on euthanasia. A working party, set up at the request of delegates at the association's annual meeting earlier this year, is expected to report by next March.

The existing guidelines are acknowledged by the BMA to need clarification. They emphasise the profession's "total abhorrence" of compulsory euthanasia, in which someone's life is terminated either against his will or without his being able to consent. But voluntary euthanasia does have followers, the guidelines state.

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