

Seriously ill Briton wins landmark ruling on assisted suicide

July 30 2009

A British multiple sclerosis sufferer won a landmark victory Thursday in her long-running legal battle to clarify the law on assisted suicide.

"I feel like I have my life back," said Debbie Purdy, who uses an electric wheelchair and has lost the ability to perform many basic functions, after the ruling by the Law Lords, Britain's highest court.

The Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) now says he will set to work clearing up the legal position and hopes to publish a new policy by the end of September.

Purdy, whose health is deteriorating, had feared that without legal clarification, she would have had to travel abroad earlier to commit suicide in a country like Switzerland where it is legal.

Otherwise, her husband, Cuban violinist Omar Puente, would risk jail for helping her.

"We can live our lives. We don't have to plan my death," the 46-year-old said outside the House of Lords, where the ruling was passed down.

The five Law Lords said in their decision that the DPP had to clarify the legal position on the issue and that a "custom-built policy statement" was needed.

"Everyone has the right to respect for their private life and the way that

Ms Purdy determines to spend the closing moments of her life is part of the act of living," they said.

"Ms Purdy wishes to avoid an undignified and distressing end to her life. She is entitled to ask that this too must be respected."

DPP Keir Starmer said prosecutors would now set to work drawing up the required legal clarification.

"We will endeavour to produce an interim policy as quickly as possible which outlines the principal factors for and against prosecution," he said.

"To that end, I have already set up a team to work through the summer with a view to producing an interim policy for prosecutors by the end of September."

Starmer also announced there would be a consultation to gauge public views on the issue with the aim of publishing a new policy at the start of next year.

In February, the Court of Appeal had rejected Purdy's bid for clarification, ruling that she was not entitled to the guidance she was seeking, but the Law Lords overruled this.

"It's a fantastic victory and all the sweeter for the fact that it is a unanimous decision," her lawyer Saimo Chahal said.

"It is important that the DPP should now wake up to the need to publish an offence-specific policy in this area".

But Phyllis Bowman, executive officer of Right To Life, attacked the decision. She said the group would be consulting its lawyers about what action to take.

"Much as we sympathise with Ms Purdy, we are extremely concerned about the manner in which this will leave the vulnerable - that is the disabled, the sick, and the aged," Bowman said.

"We do not intend to leave the matter there. We will be consulting with our lawyers to see what possible action can be taken."

Under the 1961 Suicide Act in England and Wales, aiding and abetting suicide is a criminal offence punishable by up to 14 years in prison.

More than 100 Britons, mostly terminally ill, have died at the [assisted suicide](#) clinic Dignitas near Zurich, but no one who has accompanied them has ever been prosecuted on their return to Britain.

The Purdy case was the final one to be heard by the Law Lords.

From October, the highest court in the land will be the new supreme court, introduced by the government to clarify a historic anomaly and clearly separate the legislature from judiciary.

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Citation: Seriously ill Briton wins landmark ruling on assisted suicide (2009, July 30) retrieved 2 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2009-07-ill-briton-landmark-suicide.html>

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