

More clarity needed on law of assisted suicide

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Doctors need more clarity on what they can and cannot do within the current law on assisted suicide, according to an editorial by Dr Richard Huxtable and Professor Karen Forbes in this week's *BMJ*.

Dr Richard Huxtable and Professor Karen Forbes examined the [guidance](#) for crown prosecutors issued by the Director of Public Prosecutions which was published in response to a ruling of the House of Lords. This guidance, which sets out factors for and against bringing (alleged) assistants in suicide to trial, is open for public consultation until 16 December.

[Assisted suicide](#) is unlawful and can potentially lead to up to 14 years in prison, according to the [Suicide](#) Act 1961. In their editorial, Dr Huxtable and Professor Forbes note that further guidance is nevertheless welcome because this can be an unclear area of the law. However, they also raise a

series of questions and concerns, not least for medical professionals looking to navigate a course within the boundaries of responsible, and demonstrably lawful, practice.

The authors said: “The Director of Public Prosecutions is to be commended for trying to bring prosecution policy into the open and for inviting us all to participate in clarifying the law in this area. He should now expect to receive a variety of submissions, premised on different concepts of the value of life, in which ideas like autonomy, quality of life, and sanctity of life will inevitably collide.

“It is doubtful that a prosecution policy will be capable of containing—let alone resolving—these sorts of conflicts, not least for doctors concerned to know the parameters within which they must practise.”

Richard Huxtable is Deputy Director of the Centre for [Ethics](#) in Medicine at the University of Bristol. His primary research is in the areas of end-of-life decision-making and surgical ethics, and he has published widely in medical, legal and bioethical journals, in addition to authoring the book *Euthanasia, Ethics and the Law: From Conflict to Compromise* (2007, Routledge-Cavendish).

Professor Karen Forbes is a consultant in Palliative Medicine at the University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust, and Macmillan Professorial Teaching Fellow in the Department of Palliative Medicine, Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre. Her research currently concerns how students experience learning about death and dying.

More information: [New interim guidance on assisted suicide](#) by Richard Huxtable and Karen Forbes, *BMJ* 2009; 339:b4900

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