

French panel recommends legalising assisted suicide

December 16 2013, by Olivier Thibault

A panel set up at the request of President Francois Hollande on Monday recommended legalising assisted suicide in France, where the debate on euthanasia has re-emerged after several end-of-life tragedies.

The suicides of two elderly couples in November and the heartwrenching testimony of a politician who watched her terminally-ill mother die after taking pills have shocked and moved France, where euthanasia is illegal.

"The possibility of committing medically assisted suicide... is, in our eyes, a legitimate right of a patient close to death or suffering from a terminal pathology, based first and foremost on their lucid consent and complete awareness", said the panel, made up of 18 citizens picked by polling firm Ifop to represent the population.

The so-called "Conference of Citizens" said the patient's lucidity would have to be evaluated by at least two doctors.

Hollande promised during his 2012 presidential campaign to look into legalising euthanasia, and has set up a series of consultations towards a potential bill, including the panel.

The "Conference of Citizens" said it was in favour of euthanasia in very specific circumstances, such as when the patient is not able to give his or her direct consent, but ruled out legalising the practice as a whole.

The panel also called for more palliative care in France, where it said

only 20 percent of people who need it have access to it.

Assisted suicide, which is legal in Switzerland, allows a doctor to provide a patient with all the necessary lethal substances to end their life, but lets them carry out the final act.

Euthanasia goes a step further, and allows doctors themselves to administer the lethal doses of medicine. This practice, legal in the Netherlands and Belgium, is the most controversial.

A 2005 law in France already legalises passive euthanasia, where a person causes death by withholding or withdrawing treatment that is necessary to maintain life.

In February, France's medical ethics council recommended that [assisted suicide](#) be allowed in exceptional cases.

The debate on euthanasia was revived last month when two couples in their 80s committed suicide in Paris and left notes explaining their acts.

One of the couples took their lives in the luxury Le Lutetia hotel, having asphyxiated after putting plastic bags on their heads.

They had ordered room service in the morning and were found by staff, lying hand in hand, with a typewritten note claiming "the right to die with dignity."

'Shout out the unbearable'

Earlier this month, Sandrine Rousseau, spokeswoman for the green EELV party, published a letter on her blog describing how she and her father watched for nine hours while her mother slowly died after taking pills.

"She did not commit suicide for fun, she did it because she knew that no one would cut short her suffering, at least not enough to die with dignity," she wrote on December 8.

"But her agony was long. Nine hours to endure suffering that was not medically supervised.

"Sorry mum but I will not respect one of your last wishes: to stay silent, to keep this drama to myself. I refuse. It's my first wish as a grieving daughter: to scream the horror of this situation. To shout out the unbearable and denounce it. Not to let this happen again. So that at least these nine endless hours help others die with dignity".

Polls suggest that a majority of French people are in favour of legalising euthanasia.

Recent Ifop research showed 92 percent of those questioned were in favour of the practice for "people afflicted with terminal and unbearable illnesses".

But while it is officially secular, France is a predominantly Catholic country and some of those who led mass protests against a gay marriage law that was adopted earlier this year have come out publicly against euthanasia.

Tugdual Derville, one of the spokesmen for the movement against [gay marriage](#) at the time of the protests, last month called for a "mega unified movement" against euthanasia and assisted [suicide](#).

On Twitter, where [euthanasia](#) was a top trending topic in France, debated raged Monday.

"Easy to be for, easy to be against but difficult to do, I am a nurse and I

would not want to do it..." @aissa67 said.

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