

First mercy killing of minor in Belgium: report (Update)

September 17 2016

A terminally ill 17-year-old has become the first minor to be euthanised in Belgium since age restrictions on such mercy killings in the country were lifted in 2014, it was learned Saturday.

"The euthanasia has taken place," Jacqueline Herremans, a member of Belgium's federal euthanasia commission, told AFP.

She added that the assisted death had taken place according to Belgian law.

Wim Distelmans, head of the euthanasia commission, gave no details of the minor involved beyond saying it was an exceptional case of a child with a terminal illness, the Het Nieuwsblad newspaper reported.

VRT public television said the incident involved an adolescent who was about to turn 18.

"Fortunately, there are very few children who are considered (for euthanasia) but that does not mean we should refuse them the right to a dignified death," Distelmans told the newspaper.

Since 2014, when its euthanasia legislation was amended, Belgium has been the only country in the world that allows terminally-ill children of any age to choose to end their suffering—as long as they are conscious and capable of making rational decisions.

The Netherlands also allows mercy killings for children, but only for those aged over 12.

'Very controlled'

The Belgian amendment, which was passed after heated debate—notably over the meaning of a "capacity of discernment"—offers the possibility of euthanasia to children "in a hopeless medical situation of constant and unbearable suffering that cannot be eased and which will cause death in the short term".

Any request for euthanasia must be made by the minor, be studied by a team of doctors and an independent psychiatrist or psychologist, and have parental consent.

When amending the law, Belgian legislators had decided not to include psychological suffering in the list of factors determining whether euthanasia may be allowed for minors, though it is admissible for adults.

The 2014 vote was passed by 86 lawmakers in favour and a 44 against, in the traditionally Catholic nation.

A poll which was taken a few months before the final parliamentary vote indicated that three-quarters of Belgians were in favour of extending euthanasia to minors.

Since the law was changed, there have been other euthanasia requests from minors but none had previously been granted, said Herremans.

The whole process is "very controlled" and "often very long" and particularly difficult when it concerns a minor, she added.

Altogether over 2,000 mercy killings were declared in Belgium last year,

a record number since the practice was made legal in 2002.

Last weekend Belgian Paralympian Marieke Vervoort said in Rio that she is considering euthanasia to escape a life of unbearable physical pain—only not quite yet.

Vervoort, who won silver in the 400m wheelchair race at the Paralympic Games, played down earlier reports that she planned to be euthanized after her return from Brazil.

"I have my (euthanasia) papers in my hand, but I'm still enjoying every little moment. When the moment comes when I have more bad days than good days, then I have my euthanasia papers, but the time is not there yet," she told a news conference in Rio, Brazil, where the Paralympic Games are taking place.

After the Netherlands and Belgium, Luxembourg approved euthanasia but for adults only in 2009.

In Switzerland, doctors can assist a patient seeking to die but euthanasia itself is illegal.

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