

UK publishes new rules for assisted suicide

25 February 2010, By GREGORY KATZ , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Britain's top prosecutor published new guidelines Thursday spelling out what types of assisted suicide cases were more likely to face prosecution, keeping the practice illegal but finding some leeway for suspects not to be charged.

Director of Public Prosecutions Keir Starmer said assisted suicide still remains a serious offense punishable by up to 14 years in prison, but said prosecution is least likely when the suspect is wholly motivated by compassion.

The new guidelines, reached after extensive input from the public - nearly 5,000 Britons commented - also stress that prosecution is less likely when victims themselves have reached a clear, voluntary and informed decision to end their life by suicide.

"The policy is now more focused on the motivation of the suspect rather than the characteristics of the victim," he said. "The policy does not change the law on assisted suicide. It does not open the door for euthanasia."

He said prosecutors will examine each case on its merits and decide whether there is a public interest in beginning a prosecution.

The new guidelines are similar to interim guidance provided by prosecutors last September but do reflect some significant changes. It no longer stresses that prosecution is less likely if a suspect is a family member or close friend of the victim.

Starmer was forced to publish the detailed guidance for prosecutors after Debbie Purdy, a 46-year-old with [multiple sclerosis](#), sued to force the government to reveal under what circumstances it would press charges against those who help others kill themselves.

Purdy said she feared her husband could be prosecuted if he helped her go to the Swiss suicide clinic, and said she needed the guidance to understand if she should go abroad before her condition prevented her from traveling by herself.

The [morality](#) of helping someone commit suicide is hotly debated in Britain and the new guidelines will be closely examined by advocates on both sides.

Starmer identified 16 factors that could lead prosecutors to seek criminal charges. These include cases where the victim was under 18, or did not have the capacity to make an informed decision to end their life, or did not seek the help of the suspect.

Prosecution would also be more likely in cases where the suspect had in the past been guilty of violence or abuse toward the victim, or in cases where the suspect appeared to pressure the victim to commit suicide.

Starmer listed six factors that could make [prosecution](#) less likely, including when the suspect reported the suicide to the police, cooperated with the investigation and tried to dissuade the person from taking their life.

The issue has received wide attention in the last year in part because of publicized cases in which Britons have traveled to Switzerland to end their lives in a clinic there.

The case for assisted suicide has also been boosted by best-selling author Terry Pratchett, who suffers from early onset Alzheimer's disease. He advocates the legalization of assisted suicide in some instances.

"I would like to see death as a medical procedure - in very carefully chosen cases," Terry Pratchett told BBC television Thursday.

He said he wanted to make sure that "the people who are helped to die are the people who want to die."

Laws on [assisted suicide](#) vary throughout Europe. The U.S.-based Euthanasia Research & Guidance Organization says some countries do not specifically prohibit the practice but sometimes

charge those who do it with manslaughter.

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