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## Grave task awaits MPs as they debate the End of Life Choice Bill

“David Seymour’s proposed changes to the End of Life Choice Bill, a Bill he himself previously described as ‘very tight’, amount to an admission that the introduction of euthanasia is in fact highly risky,” says Dr Peter Thirkell, spokesperson for the Care Alliance.

One of the primary concerns of the Care Alliance is whether the safeguards which are part of the Bill can provide effective protection to the many groups of vulnerable people who will be affected by a law change. “That has yet to be closely examined by Parliament,” says Dr Thirkell. “The message from numerous MPs who voted ‘yes’ for the bill at both its first and second readings is that they wanted to have a closer look at how the Bill would operate in practice.

“What is at stake here is nothing less than the possibility of wrongful deaths. Allowing a small number of persons the ‘choice’ to be assisted to end their lives has to be balanced against the harm it would do to much greater numbers of people who would not otherwise choose this option but who might find themselves coerced to do so. Our opposition to the legalisation of euthanasia is based on compassion for all those who would be adversely affected, whose lives would be placed at risk.”

“The question of coercion is one of the most critical questions for MPs to think about. Coercion operates at a number of levels, from overt physical or verbal to implicit coercion. Numerous groups, including the NZMA, testified in their submissions to the Justice Select Committee that it is impossible to properly detect coercion.”

“Good intentions and nice words on paper is one thing – the operation of the Bill in real-life with all its unintended consequences is quite another. Our member organisations include those involved in the day to day delivery of palliative care and they know just how vulnerable people are.”

The Care Alliance is also concerned about the prospect of euthanasia creep. “It is delusional to think that we can introduce euthanasia in New Zealand and limit it to those who are 18 or over with a terminal illness. That is precisely where it started in the Netherlands and in Belgium and in those countries we have seen the boundaries shift significantly to include children as well as people with mental illnesses and other conditions. Why would it be any different here?”

“It’s also a myth to think that disabled people can be written out of the Bill with a stroke of the pen. Many disabled people live constantly in the shadow of terminal conditions. The real-life experience of disabled people shows that many with serious and obvious disabilities tend to be thought of by medical practitioners as having reached a final stage prematurely.”

“Parliament has a duty to ensure that the degree of safety built into legislation matches the gravity of the risk. The risk here, wrongful death, could not be greater. As far as we are concerned, even one wrongful death is a tragedy.”

Ends

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