

Expert letter highlights risk of assisted dying increasing suicides

Legalising assisted dying in New Zealand may lead to further increases in New Zealand's already high suicide rates, a group of 21 mental health experts and researchers say in an open letter to MPs.

The group, writing as individuals, all have a professional interest in mental health, either as psychiatrists, clinical psychologists, health workers, lawyers or academics.

Spokesperson, Dion Howard, a registered nurse and specialist youth mental health worker, says the letter does not take a moral stance on euthanasia or assisted suicide, both of which would become legal under the End of Life Choice Bill.

"We feel a professional responsibility to present overseas statistical evidence regarding the relationship between assisted dying and suicide rates," Mr Howard says.

"The evidence is not conclusive because no-one has yet done the research and it is complex, but there is suggestive evidence which indicates that, over time, as the rates of assisted dying increase, there is a corresponding increase in suicide rates.

"It's a critical issue here in New Zealand because we have some of the highest suicide rates in the world, particularly for Māori, and they are still rising."

Mr Howard says he has first-hand experience of his young clients using the same justifications for their suicidal inclinations as euthanasia advocates. Other practitioners doing similar work, including school counsellors and GPs, tell similar stories.

Consultant Psychiatrist Dr Chris Gale says many MPs may have a false sense of reassurance about the relationship between assisted dying and an increase in suicide rates on the basis of a Departmental Report by Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Health officials which concluded there was no evidence that assisted dying would increase suicide rates.

Dr Gale says the report's conclusion seemed to rely on a very cursory analysis of one study in particular and did not consider other factors or research, such as the statistical patterns being seen in Oregon, the Netherlands and Belgium.

"When MPs come to vote on the End of Life Choice Bill at the third reading, their decision needs to be as fully informed as possible. They now know there is a risk that suicide rates will increase as a consequence. The evidence to say it won't happen is simply not there."

Mr Howard says Māori should be particularly concerned. "Māori suicide numbers are twice that of European New Zealanders and every suicide is one suicide too many."

He says the group want MPs to wait until more research is done before considering a law change.

"It is too risky to legislate for euthanasia or assisted suicide in New Zealand until evidence can show there's no causal effect on New Zealand's already high suicide levels."

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