



Police & Crime Commissioner for Cleveland
c/o Steria Shared Service Centre
Ash House
III Acres
Princeton Drive
Thornaby
Stockton-On-Tees
TS17 6AJ

Email: pcc@cleveland.pnn.police.uk
Website: <http://www.cleveland.pcc.police.uk>

Police and Crime Commissioner:
Chief Executive & Monitoring Officer:

Barry Coppinger
Simon Dennis BA, Solicitor

Tel: 01642 301653
Tel: 01642 301653

Via email only

31 October, 2019

Dear colleague,

Assisted Dying

I refer to the open letter and comment article in today's Guardian on the subject of assisted dying. Along with 17 of my colleagues from across England and Wales, I believe it is time for the Government to open a call for evidence on the functioning of the law and I hope I can count on your support.

This year alone, two high-profile cases have exemplified the wide-ranging impacts of the blanket ban on assisted dying. In February, Ann Whaley, a woman in her 70s from Buckinghamshire, was interviewed under caution by police from the local domestic violence team after an anonymous tip-off that she was planning to help her husband, who had terminal motor neurone disease, to travel to Switzerland so that he could have an assisted death. In September, great-grandmother Mavis Eccleston was acquitted by a jury after being charged with murder for helping Dennis, her husband of 60 years, to end his own life rather than suffer any further agony from advanced bowel cancer.

In both cases, the police and prosecution services were performing their roles, as ever, with commitment and sensitivity. They were not at fault, but were enforcing a law that criminalises anyone for helping someone to take their own life, even if they do so with love and compassion. The cases demonstrate the huge financial, emotional and societal cost of the blanket ban on assisted dying. Their impacts are felt by dying people and their families, but also felt keenly by the police and prosecution services who have to enforce these laws in extremely difficult circumstances.

It is also clear that the ban on assisted dying is not even achieving its aim of protecting vulnerable people as enforcement is a scattergun affair. Based on Dignitas figures alone, more than 300 Britons have had an assisted death in Switzerland since 2009 but the Crown Prosecution Service has investigated only 152 cases of assisted suicide. This does not account for cases where people are assisted to die in this country, the number of cases of which are impossible to estimate. Even when these rare investigations do take place, they almost inevitably take place only after someone has died,



The Police & Crime Commissioner for Cleveland is an accredited Living Wage Employer with the Living Wage Foundation.

when it is obviously far too late to protect them. The investigations are lengthy, distressing and intrusive for families and for the police officers involved.

Those with the means to travel to Switzerland can have medical assistance to die for the price of £10,000 but those unable to travel or unable to afford it must decide to take the laws into their own hands, often behind closed doors and inevitably without professional assistance. Earlier this year, in response to Ann Whaley's case, former Supreme Court Judge Lord Sumption said there was "no moral obligation to obey the law" when it came to assisted dying. He argued that "the law should continue to criminalise assisted suicide, and I think that the law should be broken from time to time". This creates a two-tier system of enforcement, where those able to break the law by travelling overseas are less likely to face investigation and prosecution, while those less able to afford the Swiss option face a far greater risk.

As a result, I do not think that the existing laws can command the confidence of the British public and its public servants. There are of course a broad range of views on whether or how assisted dying should be legalised in this country, but I hope you would agree with me that there is a need for a fresh look at how our current laws are functioning.

This is a cause very close to my own heart as I watch my friend, Durham Police, Crime and Victims' Commissioner Ron Hogg, suffering with motor neurone disease while calling on lawmakers to give him the right to choose when to end his own life. I believe that reviewing the laws in this area could provide countless sufferers of terminal illnesses the reassurance that their loved ones will be safe from prosecution if they assist them in ending their pain with dignity.

I look forward to hearing your views on whether you support a call for evidence.

Yours faithfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Barry Coppinger', written in a cursive style.

Barry Coppinger

Police and Crime Commissioner for Cleveland