

The Catholic Parliamentary Office



An agency of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland

Submission to the Health and Sport Committee – Suicide Prevention Inquiry.

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Introduction – The Bishops' Conference of Scotland

The Bishops' Conference of Scotland is a registered charity (No 16650). The Conference enables the Roman Catholic Bishops in Scotland to work together, undertaking nationwide initiatives through their Commissions and Agencies.

The members of the Bishops' Conference are the Bishops of the eight Scottish Dioceses. The Bishops' Conference of Scotland is a permanently constituted assembly, which has a number of commissions and agencies that assist it in carrying out its work.

The Catholic Parliamentary Office is an agency of the Bishops' Conference of Scotland and part of its remit is to engage with the work of Parliament and Government, including responding to consultations and calls for evidence on behalf of the Bishops' Conference.

The Bishops' Conference of Scotland welcomes the Health and Sport Committee's inquiry into suicide prevention in Scotland and is grateful of the opportunity to submit a contribution.

Submission

Our submission focuses on one particular aspect relating to suicide prevention: the threat of legalisation of assisted suicide/euthanasia. Whilst we haven't tackled every question posed by the Committee, we believe this threat should be treated as a priority in any consideration of suicide prevention and, in this sense, it is relevant to question 3: ***What actions should be prioritised in the forthcoming strategy?***

There can be little doubting the importance of an effective suicide prevention strategy, the primary objective of which is to tackle the prevalence of suicide in Scotland. Such a strategy is vital in ensuring that appropriate care and support is directed to those who are at risk of suicide, all with the intention of preserving life.

We are all called to value human life and here in the UK we have a proud and committed history of tackling suicide. Yet this is now being compromised. The persistent push to legalise assisted suicide/euthanasia could have a seriously detrimental impact on how we perceive and tackle suicide. Introducing a statutory provision which states that assisted suicide is acceptable suddenly transforms suicide into something that is no longer in need of tackling; on the contrary, it becomes the preferred way of dealing with serious or terminal illness, both physical and mental. By normalising suicide we no longer see it as a threat, but as a cure. By accepting it we create a hierarchy of value and worth, the effect of which might be to pressure people into taking their own lives when they no longer meet the cultural requirements of the new order. It suggests that certain lives have little or no value and we make the already vulnerable exponentially more vulnerable.

By seeing suicide in this way we risk losing suicide prevention strategies such as the one which is subject to this inquiry. We risk losing the incredible and literally lifesaving work of organisations such as The Samaritans, Breathing Space and Brothers in Arms. We compromise much of the work of Barnardo's, SAMH and the Mental Health Foundation. Programmes and initiatives that are geared towards preventing suicide would be in a constant battle with a culture which, with increasing ignorance, no longer views suicide as a problem.

Those who are already vulnerable to suicide would become even more vulnerable with the introduction of legalised suicide. Once indispensable to society they now find themselves as one with lesser value and ripe for dispensation. The Hippocratic Oath, the ultimate principle of the preservation of life, would no longer apply.

James Jopling, Executive Director of the Samaritans, said recently that the issue of suicide is not being taken as seriously as it should. It is, therefore, important that the Scottish Government, and the Parliament which holds it to account, be as one in committing to tackling suicide. This will be extremely difficult to achieve if suicide is legalised and deemed to be socially acceptable. We, as a society, must continue to discourage suicide and work hard to prevent it. We should not encourage it with dangerous laws.