

Landmark euthanasia ruling



In June 2017 a banker known as Mr Y had a heart attack leaving him in a permanent vegetative or minimally conscious state. Mr Y's family said that he would not want to live in this state. They were backed by Mr Y's doctors.

Mr Y's case was taken to the Supreme Court which ruled that it was no longer necessary for doctors and relatives to go to the Court of Protection to get permission to remove food and liquid from certain patients to bring about their death. Doctors and relatives can now make the decision that removing food and fluids is 'in the patient's best interests.' This ruling effectively widens the cases where passive euthanasia is permitted and removes it from judicial oversight.

What are the dangers of this ruling?

- 1.** Death can never be considered as being 'in the best interests' of a sick or disabled person.
- 2.** The view that people in a permanent vegetative state or other 'prolonged disorder of consciousness' are better off dead because of their quality of life, diminishes their status as human beings.
- 3.** Classing food and fluid as 'medical treatment' is a key factor in enabling brain-injured people like Mr Y to be killed by dehydration and starvation. Hunger and thirst are not illnesses which need to be cured. Labelling what is now termed 'clinically assisted nutrition and hydration' (CANH) as 'treatment' is consistently used to justify its removal.
- 4.** Withdrawing food and fluids means that the patient dies of dehydration and starvation. The Royal College of Physicians acknowledges this, yet still recommends that doctors draw up the death certificate with the original brain injury as the cause of death. This sort of cover up is not only dishonest but drives this practice under the radar.

- 5.** The Y case shows that no distinction is being made between removing CANH in patients not imminently dying and stopping futile administration of fluids. In patients near the end of life, providing food and fluid can be futile and pose a genuine burden to patients. For patients not imminently dying nutrition and hydration are necessary to avoid dehydration and starvation. As this critical distinction continues to be ignored and leads to cruel protracted deaths, the pressure for active euthanasia (such as by lethal injection) will increase.
- 6.** The Supreme Court judgment also sanctions relatives and doctors making the official decision that food and fluids can be withdrawn from other groups of vulnerable people, including those 'in advanced stages of a degenerative neurological condition such as Huntington's disease or multiple sclerosis, or in the advanced stages of dementia'.

Assisted suicide

Furthermore, legalised assisted suicide is getting closer in England and Wales following a vote by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP). In March 2019 the RCP changed its position from opposition to assisted suicide to one of neutrality. The move to neutrality is seen as a critical step towards a change in the law.

ACTION: Join our Action Alert list to keep up to date with action needed to fight against euthanasia, assisted suicide and attacks on unborn children. Email information@spuc.org.uk stating clearly that you want your address to be added to the list.