

James Mumford

Don't let the assisted-suicide lobby hijack 'dignity'

📅 1 October 2021, 12:31pm



The assisted-suicide debate begins with a contest over language, a war over a word. That word is 'dignity.' The Swiss assisted suicide clinic, where every eight days one Briton travels to die, is called Dignitas. In 2006, the Voluntary Euthanasia Society changed its name to Dignity in Dying. And Oregon's 1998 liberalising law – the model for the legislation Baroness Meacher is proposing in this country – was called the Death with Dignity Act.

The effect of co-opting the word 'dignity' is to imply if you have a

terminal illness and want to maintain dignity at the end of your life you will choose assisted suicide. The disastrous implication of this is illness can be undignified.

I can't imagine what it must be like to live with Stage Four Cancer or to suffer the final phases of a disease as cruel as motor neurone disease. I can't imagine the effect such an experience has on your psyche, on your understanding of yourself. But to say that such conditions can strip you of your dignity cannot be right.

Certainly, it *is* possible to lose your dignity. I can behave in ways that are beneath me. I can be obsequious, for example, or cravenly conform. But as the late German philosopher Robert Spaemann puts it, 'only *you* can forfeit your own dignity.' External circumstances, even the most awful, cannot detract from your dignity. Suffering does not rob a human being of his or her honour or worth. It is the rapist, not their victim – the person who *inflicts* injury, not the person who *suffers* it – who has lost their dignity. But people who have terminal illnesses have done nothing to forfeit their own dignity and it is sinister to suggest otherwise.

What's more, the assisted suicide lobby says it wants merely to offer the terminally ill a choice. But equating the choice of assisted suicide with 'dignity' is in effect a recommendation. To vulnerable people at the most difficult stage of their life, that is fundamentally coercive. Who wants to be undignified?

The assisted suicide lobby paints a deceptively dystopian picture of palliative care in this country, propagating the myth that the terminally ill and men and women with degenerative diseases routinely die in squalor and in pain. In fact, the NHS excels at palliative care. And the modern hospice movement, begun in Britain in the late 1960s by Dame Cicely Saunders, is one of the greatest achievements of our profoundly compassionate country.

The palliative care community has a radically different idea of dignity to the one propagated by the assisted suicide lobby. According to the doctors, nurses and chaplains – those with extensive experience of caring for people at the end of life – dignity means showing people who are dying that they are still *valued*. This entails not only providing critically important pain relief but also trying to get to know them. Christians tend to oppose euthanasia not because of some creepy lust for agony, but because Christianity teaches that no circumstances, however horrific, can vitiate the inherent dignity of all human beings. And the danger of departing from this conviction, of suggesting to all those who suffer with terminal illness that they have lost their dignity, cannot be overstated.

WRITTEN BY

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