

ASSISTED DYING BILL – POLITY

NEWS: The U.K. House of Commons passed the **Assisted Dying Bill** to allow **terminally ill people in England and Wales to end their lives**.

WHAT'S IN THE NEWS?

Understanding Assisted Dying

- **Definition:** Assisted dying involves **intentionally helping a person end their life**, typically to relieve suffering from terminal illness or unbearable pain.
- **Two Main Forms:**
 - **Assisted Suicide:** A patient takes their own life, often by ingesting prescribed lethal medication, with assistance from a medical professional or another individual.
 - **Euthanasia:** A medical professional **actively administers a lethal drug** to end the patient's life, usually at the patient's voluntary and informed request.

The Proposed Assisted Dying Bill in the UK

- **Applicability:** The bill applies to **residents of England and Wales** diagnosed with **less than six months to live**.
- **Eligibility Requirements:**
 - The patient must be **mentally competent** to make such a decision.
 - Approval must be secured from **two doctors**, a **psychiatrist**, a **senior lawyer**, and a **social worker**, creating a rigorous multi-tiered screening process.
- **Supporters' View:** Advocates see the bill as a **humane and compassionate option** that offers relief from prolonged suffering and lessens emotional strain on families.
- **Critics' Concerns:** Opponents fear the bill might **pressure vulnerable patients**, including the disabled or elderly, to choose death to avoid burdening their caregivers.

Status of Assisted Dying Globally

- **Switzerland:** Became the **first country** to legalise assisted dying in **1942**, with strict conditions and processes.
- **Europe:** Six countries have legalised some form of assisted dying:
 - **Switzerland, Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain, and Austria.**
- **Other Countries:**
 - **United States:** Assisted dying is legal in several states like Oregon, Washington, and California.
 - **Australia and New Zealand:** Both countries have legal frameworks allowing voluntary assisted dying.

- **Canada:** The **2016 Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD)** law permits assisted dying **even if the illness is not terminal**, subject to strict eligibility and review mechanisms.

Position of India on Assisted Dying

- **Passive Euthanasia Legalised:** In **2018**, the **Supreme Court of India** legalised **passive euthanasia**, allowing withdrawal of life support for terminally ill patients under specific conditions.
- **Living Will Provision:**
 - The Court recognised the “**right to die with dignity**” as part of the **fundamental right to life under Article 21** of the Constitution.
 - A **living will** is a legal document that allows individuals to specify their medical treatment preferences if they become incapable of making decisions in the future.
- **State-Level Implementation:**
 - **Goa** became the **first state** to institutionalise aspects of the Supreme Court’s directives on end-of-life decisions.
- **Recent Developments:**
 - In **2024**, the **Union Health Ministry** released **draft guidelines** clarifying that doctors must avoid life-support interventions that **prolong suffering** without offering meaningful recovery.

Arguments in Favour of Assisted Dying

- **Respect for Autonomy:** Individuals should have the **freedom to decide when and how they die**, particularly when facing irreversible suffering.
- **Dignity in Death:** Enables patients to **avoid prolonged physical pain, loss of dignity**, and emotional distress during the final stages of terminal illness.
- **Improved Quality of Life:** For patients with debilitating conditions, **ending life peacefully** may be preferable to enduring unmanageable pain or complete dependence.
- **Human Rights-Based Approach:** Advocates see assisted dying as part of the **individual’s right to bodily autonomy and informed choice** in healthcare.

Arguments Against Assisted Dying

- **Moral and Religious Objections:** Many religious and ethical perspectives argue that **life is sacred** and must not be intentionally ended, even at the individual’s request.
- **Risk of Coercion:** Vulnerable groups—such as the **elderly, disabled, mentally ill, or financially burdened**—may feel indirect pressure to choose death to avoid being a burden.
- **Violation of Medical Ethics:** Traditional medical ethics bind doctors to the **principle of preserving life**, and assisted dying may undermine this fundamental duty.
- **Alternatives Exist:** With advances in **palliative care and pain management**, critics argue that **adequate support can eliminate the need for assisted dying**.

Way Ahead and Policy Considerations

- **Stronger Legal Safeguards:**
 - Countries should develop **rigorous protocols** to prevent misuse, including **mental health evaluations** and **second opinions**.
 - Establish **independent oversight committees** to monitor and review all assisted dying cases.
- **Expansion of Palliative Care:**
 - Universal access to high-quality **palliative and end-of-life care** must be prioritised to alleviate pain and support families.
 - Awareness and infrastructure for **hospice care** should be enhanced in both urban and rural areas.
- **Encouraging Public Discourse:**
 - Democratic societies must foster **open discussions** about the ethical, legal, and medical dimensions of assisted dying to evolve a consensus-based approach.
- **Learning from Global Experiences:**
 - Countries can **adapt best practices** from nations where assisted dying is legal, including legal safeguards, counseling systems, and patient autonomy frameworks.
- **Mental Health and Counseling Support:**
 - Ensure mandatory **psychological evaluations** to determine informed consent, and rule out depression, coercion, or other mental health issues.

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