

Joint Oireachtas Committee on Assisted Dying

Opening statement – John Wall – Oct 10th, 2023

Thank you Cathaoirleach & Committee Members for the opportunity to participate in today's discussion. I wish to acknowledge from the onset that this is a difficult conversation for many, but one which thankfully this country is now more than ready to have.

Almost a year ago to the day I made a promise to my good friend Vicky Phelan that this issue would continue to be discussed & debated in her absence. As we are all aware, Vicky was a passionate advocate for change & fervently supported the right to die with dignity should the need arise. This is a topic we discussed in some detail in the months prior to her death & can assure committee members that we were of a very similar mindset regarding this very emotive subject.

Like Vicky, I too was diagnosed with a terminal illness & was advised to "get my affairs in order". There are no appropriate words to describe the emptiness & loneliness felt when you are told such harrowing news. Far from wishing to die though, we sought to outlive our respective prognoses & so began a journey helping others understand what the world looked like through our eyes. We seek to extend our time on this earth by exploring every available avenue which offers hope & gives a lifeline where once there was none or if indeed it did exist, was barely visible. I mention this because of the necessity for others to clearly see that for the vast majority of those with a terminal condition, this conversation pertains to a point in that journey where life itself is ebbing away. This is about how a person say's their final goodbye rather than when, given the fact that the inevitable is within sight.

Despite our best efforts though, not all treatments are successful to the point where life is guaranteed & no matter the inner strength one possesses, not all are as fortunate as I & succumb to their illness, with many having to endure horrific physical & mental pain in the process. This I might add is despite the best efforts of our Palliative Care Services, which incidentally I have nothing but high regard for. In fact, I would like to see these services work in tandem with the healthcare professionals, that will one day hopefully be entrusted with overseeing a person's right to guarantee a dignified passing.

I like many others fear what that end will entail, but also acknowledge that expectations can be surpassed & like myself, that fear can turn to unbridled & unexpected joy when you start to outlive the expectations of others in terms of life itself. This is a hugely important part of this debate & only serves to reinforce the absolute necessity for all involved to understand the nuances & complexities of the issue. There is no “one size fits all” solution & rather than pit one side of this conversation against the other, the solution is that we work collectively to ensure progress which I believe will bring Ireland to a point where we will legislate for Assisted Dying, thus ensuring where appropriate & possible a dignified passing for those that seek it.

We all have a responsibility when publicly commenting & discussing, to ensure that the narrative remains where possible focused & not stray into constant comparators with other jurisdictions. I also wish to express my concerns around the religious narrative that has somehow made its way into this conversation. Regardless of religious beliefs, death is something that in some way shape or form, all of us are guaranteed. To this end, I wish to reiterate that we are here to discuss what may be deemed acceptable to the Irish public & subsequently achieved through a rigorous legislative process, after which can be implemented via an equally exhaustive administrative process. Yes we can learn from others, but as a democratic nation we hold ourselves accountable & to suggest any form of implementation will lead to the so called “slippery slope”, does nothing other than to undermine the credibility of all those involved, not to mention that of the very people we are so desperately trying to help.

In order to fully understand, it's critical we responsibly explain. Many examples have been cited as to how this will or will not work, with those opposed frequently using words like suicide in an attempt to influence the thoughts & views of us all. I would ask that the language we all use take consideration of those that have sadly taken their own lives in tragically different circumstances than the one we're discussing today. Including those who voluntarily seeking a dignified passing in such a conversation is disrespectful to all concerned in the extreme, most especially to our loved ones who must listen to it.

I'd like to reassert why we're here in the first instance by using my own explanation on how I explain it to others. Contrary to many beliefs, we are merely seeking for the right to apply for consideration of a Dignified Death. In so doing, it is others who will ultimately decide if the application will be successful. With many believing this decision rests with the person, I believe it's vital we dispel any idea that this would ever be an opportunity for any individual to simply cease living. The threshold criteria for consideration & composition of the decision-making panel will invariably prove difficult to legislate for, but upon recommendation from this Committee, that process can at least begin.

There's absolutely no doubt there's significant public support for legislating for Assisted Dying. No longer are we bound by religious beliefs nor the inability of our citizens to have their say in the decision-making process. Testimony to that fact is our very presence here today. Time is precious to us all & especially those who live with a terminal illness. I urge each & every committee member to resist the temptation to push this issue further into the procedural abyss, by recommending progress & being the catalysts for change. We have an opportunity to ease the transition for some from this life to the next, whatever & wherever that may be.

Finally, I would like to sincerely wish this Committee well with the decisions that it must make in the months ahead & hope that this contribution & that of many others will assist in that process.

