



**HUMANIST  
ASSOCIATION  
OF IRELAND**

*compassion • equality • reason*

## *Statement to the Joint Committee on Assisted Dying*

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## Introduction

The Humanist Association of Ireland (HAI) is grateful for the opportunity to make a statement on the question of introducing assisted dying legislation in Ireland. The Committee has already heard from our sister organisation, Humanists UK, and we hold a similar position. The HAI represents the non-religious community in Ireland, and advocates for a society which respects the separation of Church and State. Of course, we respect those for whom assisted dying is incompatible with their religious beliefs. Those who do not agree with assisted dying will not opt for an assisted death. However, for those of us who do not hold religious beliefs, the question of whether assisted dying should be permitted in law is framed in ethical rather than religious terms.

## Arguments in support of assisted dying legislation

The humanist position is based on reason and compassion, and on the value we place on personal autonomy. Palliative care plays an important role in helping the dying to have a peaceful death, but for some unfortunate people, pain relieving measures are not effective. In some cases, death comes only after a long period of unbearable suffering arising from an incurable and progressive medical condition. The HAI supports assisted dying for people who are suffering from a terminal, incurable or progressive condition and feel that their quality of life is so unbearable that they want a painless death at a time of their choosing. The key argument is the value we place on the autonomy of the individual. When close to death, or suffering from a progressive incurable illness, we believe the individual should have the right to choose to end their life. To be denied this right means that many people suffer an end which is determined by the decisions of others. And in some cases, an unbearable situation forces people to attempt suicide which often brings more pain and suffering for the individuals and their families. Our position also recognises that the law is inconsistent as it stands: people are legally permitted to refuse treatment, even when such refusal will result in death. In the case of people who are unconscious or in a coma, and therefore unable to express their wishes, treatment is sometimes withdrawn or withheld. Why, therefore, should an assisted death be denied to those who are competent and able to express the wish for it?

## Arguments against assisted dying

Apart from the religious argument which should not be the determinant of our laws, the main argument against assisted dying is the “slippery slope” argument. This holds that the controls on assisted dying will inevitably be loosened over time, and people, particularly those in vulnerable groups, will be pressurised into agreeing to an assisted death. There has been a number of extensive and well-respected studies to see if there is such a trend in jurisdictions where assisted dying is permitted, and no



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evidence of a “slippery slope” has been found. It is the HAI’s contention that a well-regulated and monitored system poses no danger to individuals or vulnerable groups.

## Conclusion

The Committee will have heard haunting testimony from a number of people who either wished to avail of assisted dying, but were unable to do so, or who had a loved one who managed to avail of an assisted death in another jurisdiction. One of our members, Garret Ahern, has spoken movingly to the Committee of his experience of accompanying his wife to Belgium so she could avail of an assisted death when the pain from her incurable cancer could no longer be managed effectively. It is wrong that only those with the means and courage to travel to a foreign country are able to exercise this choice. The HAI believes that we in Ireland should join the increasing number of countries who have legislated for assisted dying for the terminally ill and incurably suffering. Evidence shows that the majority of people who choose to die have exhausted the palliative care measures available to them. Others know that they may have an assisted death, but choose not to do so. These individuals testify to the peace of mind that they gain by knowing this option was available to them. We all would like a natural, peaceful death. When that option is not a possibility, which of us would not like to know that if our suffering became unbearable, the option of an assisted, painless death will be open to us? The majority of Irish people support legalising assisted dying. Let us make this a reality.