Assisted dying commission says nurses could have technical role

By Petra Kendall-Raynor

Nurses could be called on to provide practical support to terminally ill patients with a physical impairment who want to die, according to the Commission on Assisted Dying.

The recommendation is included in a 415-page report published last week. It says that nurses should be able to opt out of any role in the assisted dying process if it goes against their personal ethics.

It is currently illegal to assist the suicide of a patient in the UK. The independent commission was set up to consider whether the existing legal and policy approach to assisted dying in England and Wales is fit for purpose.

The commission led a 12-month inquiry and concluded that a patient must take the final action that would end their own life.

The report states that ‘appropriate practical support’ to take the medication would be required if the person has a physical impairment.

It added that this could not take the form of another person administering the drugs.

Hospice medical director Carole Dacombe, a member of the commission, said: ‘If someone has a physical disability, we would want to see technical aids available, possibly in the form of a computerised process, in which the medication can be delivered. This may be a process set up by a nurse or a doctor.’

Those aged 18 or over who have been certified as having less than 12 months to live will qualify to end their own life, according to the recommendations.

Meeting the criteria

The person should have the mental capacity to make a voluntary choice and two doctors should decide independently whether the legally required criteria has been met.

But Christian Nurses and Midwives spokesperson Steven Fouch claimed that if the recommendations were enacted in law, it would become easier for the categories of eligible patients to be widened.

Nurse Karen Sanders, vice chair of Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying, welcomed the report. She said that nurses need to be vocal in their views about the subject if a bill was ever put forward.

The report suggests that the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) would need to develop codes of practice and specify levels of experience for professionals who take a role in assisted dying.

The NMC would not comment on the report, but reminded nurses that assisting the suicide of a patient is against the law.

The RCN published guidance for nurses on assisted dying in October last year. Assistant head of nursing Tim Curry warned that proper consultations would be important before any legal changes come into practice.

To read the report go to http://tinyurl.com/6rg2y6u

For RCN guidance on assisted suicide go to http://tinyurl.com/6xda3eh

LONE WORKERS FACE ONGOING SAFETY RISK

Healthcare organisations are failing in their legal duty to protect lone workers, with only one in five community nurses being offered safety alarms, according to research commissioned by the RCN.

A survey involving 766 nurses found that 10 per cent had been physically abused by patients in the previous 24 months. A further 60 per cent were subjected to verbal abuse in the same period.

Nearly 40 per cent of nurses felt risks to lone workers had increased since the start of 2010, with increased caseloads, rising patient and carer expectations, and increased levels of substance misuse in part to blame.

The Department of Health released funding in 2009 to provide 30,000 lone workers with alarm devices. Only a fifth of nurses have been offered them, however.

Learning disability nurse David Brown was forced to use his lone safety alarm last month when he had to restrain a client who was self-harming. The nurse, from Hertfordshire Partnership NHS Foundation Trust, said: ‘It was comforting to know I had back-up should I need it.’

NHS Employers director Dean Royles said much work has been done in recent years to support employees.

For a copy of the survey report go to http://tinycc/lone-working
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