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Covid-19: Assisted dying travel allowed during lockdown, says Hancock

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Matt Hancock: "These coronavirus regulations do not change the existing legal position on assisted dying."

People travelling abroad for the purpose of assisted dying will not be breaking coronavirus travel rules, the health secretary has said.

New lockdown rules in England place restrictions on leaving home without a reasonable excuse.

But Matt Hancock told MPs that seeking an assisted death abroad counted as a reasonable excuse.

He also stressed that it remains a criminal offence to encourage or assist the death of another person.

He was replying to Conservative MP Andrew Mitchell, who said new coronavirus regulations could "deter" people from travelling to Switzerland for an assisted death.

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Mr Mitchell referred to [an article in the Times by a mental health professional](#) who said the pandemic meant she would travel to Switzerland for an assisted death "before I am truly ready".



Jane Parker has motor neurone disease

Jane Parker is 69 from Devon was diagnosed with motor neurone disease last October.

"It is killing me and has already taken my speech, my ability to swallow and is now robbing me of my breathing," she says.

"I have only months left and I want to be able to choose how and when I die, but the current law in the UK denies me this right.

"Before lockdown, I could have travelled to Switzerland with suitable advance preparations and cash, accompanied by brave family members who are prepared to risk a police interview and possible arrest.

"Although I would much prefer to be able to die in my own bed and not have to travel to a foreign country to die, knowing the option of Dignitas was there brought me comfort.

"But now the latest lockdown has made this is virtually impossible.

"While the health secretary has said today that travelling abroad for an assisted death is permitted under lockdown, there are now vanishingly few flights to Switzerland, it is impossible to plan ahead with the ever-changing restrictions, and it is extremely difficult to get hold of the documents you need to prove that you are terminally ill and of sound mind.

"And so I must contemplate letting nature take its course, with no guarantee that end of life care will be enough to relieve my suffering, or try to hasten my end by refusing food through my PEG [Percutaneous endoscopic gastrostomy] tube and effectively starving to death.

"I find it barbaric that these are the only options now open to me, and I know there will be terminally ill people across the country facing the same stark choices.

"The time has come to review these cruel laws and I hope the health secretary will give people in my position the opportunity to have our voices heard."

Sarah Wootton, chief executive of campaign group Dignity in Dying, said: "The pandemic has proven what we have long known, that banning assisted dying does not protect people; it merely drives the practice overseas and underground and criminalises acts of genuine compassion.

"Parliamentarians must step up and grasp this nettle. Gathering evidence on what is really going on under the ban on assisted dying can only help them in that task, and a review of the functioning and impact of our current law would give terminally ill Brits and their loved ones a much-needed voice in this debate."

Intentionally helping another person to kill themselves is known as assisted suicide - this can include buying someone a ticket to Switzerland (where assisted suicide is legal) to end their life.

Dignity in Dying are campaigning for a law that would allow assisted dying, for those who are terminally ill.

The Care Not Killing alliance, which is against assisted dying, argues that changing the law could result in elderly or vulnerable people feeling under greater pressure to end their lives.

Last month, New Zealand voted in a referendum to allow terminally ill people with less than six months to live the opportunity to choose assisted dying if approved by two doctors.

'Complex issue'

Addressing MPs, Mr Hancock said "Under current law, based on the Suicide Act 1961, it is an offence to encourage or assist the death of another person.

"However, it is legal to travel abroad for the purpose of assisted dying where it is allowed in that jurisdiction.

"The new coronavirus regulations which come into force today place restrictions on leaving the home without a reasonable excuse.

"Travelling abroad for the purpose of assisted dying is a reasonable excuse and so anyone doing so would not be breaking the law."

He added that the "question of how we best support people in their choices at the end of their life is a complex moral issue that, when considered, weighs heavily upon us all."

"I think it is right that we locate this question within a broader discussion of how we care for people at the end of their lives which has become sadly - due to the coronavirus pandemic - a central issue of public debate in this country," said the health secretary.





Opponents to a bill legalising assisted dying protest outside Parliament in 2014

'Inappropriate'

Labour's shadow health secretary Jonathan Ashworth welcomed Mr Hancock's "sensitive" tone but said: "Charities have warned that since the March lockdown terminally ill people are ending their lives in the most traumatic of circumstances because of a lack of clarity - although he has given clarity today - but until that point a lack of clarity about the law."

Conservative MP Daniel Kawczynski told MPs his opinion on the subject had been changed by his constituent Noel Conway from Garmston who lives near Shrewsbury.

"I said to him, 'why don't you go to Switzerland?'. And his answer will stay with me forever: 'No, I'm an Englishman, I want to die in England.' And I think it's extremely important that our citizens have this right."

But his Conservative colleague, Fiona Bruce, said the pandemic had left people feeling vulnerable and argued that it would be "completely inappropriate indeed insensitive to go anywhere near considering making access to any form of suicide easier at this time".

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