

NEWS FOCUS

Enlightened progress

Arguments for and against legalising assisted dying were put forward in the States Chamber yesterday. **Charley-Kai John** reports

STATES Members yesterday set out their views on assisted dying during a landmark debate.

If the proposition is successful, Jersey would become the first place in the British Isles to approve the 'fundamental change', and in the build-up to a significant in-principle vote, campaigners on both sides of the debate held events, wrote letters and emails, and lobbied Constables, Deputies and Senators.

States Members spoke of their concerns yesterday, both at having and not having the right to choose to die. Several Members gave emotionally charged speeches and offered quotes from prominent campaigners and testimony about the impact of end-of-life suffering.

Some, such as Health Minister Richard Renouf, argued it was a 'fundamental change' for the worse, while others, such as Senator Steve Pallett, said that it was a 'common-sense way forward' and that



■ At various points during yesterday's debate, assisted dying was described as a 'common-sense way forward', and a 'fundamental change' for the worse. Picture: SHUTTERSTOCK

Islanders should not be denied the choice. Senator Sam Mézec called it 'literally a life-and-death matter'.

Introducing the proposition on behalf of the Council of Ministers, Home Affairs Minister Gregory Guida said: 'This is a

current societal issue being discussed and debated worldwide and Jersey should not ignore it.'

What States Members said during the debate...

■ St John Constable Andy Jehan said that 'the biggest concerns for Islanders are around safeguards, and in particular safeguards for the vulnerable'.

Reading from a recent JEP column written by terminally ill journalist Gary Burgess, Mr Jehan added: 'For my part I've always found this one really simple: it's my life, so I should be free to choose what I want to do, so long as it doesn't hurt other people.'

Mr Jehan compared assisted dying to an emergency exit: 'We all like to know where it is, but we hope to never have to use it.'

■ Deputy Steve Luce said he had read and responded to every letter sent to him, but had not been swayed in his support for assisted dying.

The first thing, he said, was 'this is an in-principle debate and I have no doubt in my mind that we need to consider this issue further and in detail', while the second involved the wording of the proposition, which concerned those 'diagnosed with a terminal illness, which is expected to result in unbearable suffering that cannot be alleviated'.

Deputy Luce said: 'I have seen the fear in the eyes of those who are suffering.'

■ Senator Steve Pallett said he had held a 'strong view' on the subject for some time, calling it a 'common-sense way forward'. He said: 'If palliative care is your

choice, then that needs to be respected, but the same level of respect needs to be levelled at those who make the decision that the quality of their life is so poor, due to extreme pain and suffering, that they choose to end it.'

'I think I would want a choice,' he said. 'Many who have written to me have said they should not be denied that choice.'

■ St Saviour Constable Sadie Le Sueur-Rennard made reference to one of her friend's husbands, who had suffered at the end of his life, which she said was 'haunting me all the way through this debate'. She argued that Islanders should not have to travel elsewhere to end their lives, and should 'have the right to do it here'. Mrs Le Sueur-Rennard also used the example of her own farm, saying that if an animal was unwell, the vet came and put it to sleep 'gently and kindly at home'.

'Human beings should be given that dignity to be allowed to choose,' she told the Chamber.

■ St Martin Constable Karen Shenton-Stone said she had been 'inundated' with emails, and labelled the sitting 'by far the hardest debate I have ever had to take part in'. Mrs Shenton-Stone, who had to pause for moments in her speech when talking about seeing a loved one suffer, said it was a 'very, very difficult and emotional matter' and was 'funda-

mentally' about human dignity. She said she had been for and against, and sat on the fence, but would be supporting the amended proposition 'after much soul searching'.

■ Deputy Rob Ward admitted that the proposition facing Members was the 'most challenging debate and decision we face in the Assembly'. He reminded his colleagues of the support the citizens' jury had shown for assisted dying.

'It will require careful regulations, and the right for medical practitioners to opt out,' he cautioned, adding: 'Those who oppose this on religious grounds have the right not to take this option - as does anybody.'

■ St Ouen Constable Richard Buchanan said: 'The taking of a life by another is a giant step, and should not be taken lightly.' He added that 'mistakes cannot be rectified', labelling the vote a 'cliff-edge event with no return', as he shared his fear that by approving assisted dying, Members would be 'opening a door we may never be able to close'. He also referenced a speech the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, made during an assisted-dying debate in the UK: 'No amount of safeguards can perfect the human heart. No amount of regulation can make a relative kinder or a doctor infallible. No amount of reassurance can make a vulnerable or disabled person

feel equally safe and equally valued if the law is changed in this way.'

■ Deputy Steve Ahier argued that assisted dying was not at odds with religion, highlighting that a former Archbishop, Lord George Carey, had argued that it should be legalised.

Deputy Ahier said that 'we all have to face the fact that we die and this is inevitable' but that what they were 'able to influence and control is the manner of our dying'.

Having to go to Switzerland for assisted dying 'outsources people's death overseas at huge financial, practical and emotional cost to the families involved', he said. Deputy Ahier also cited the words of Rabbi Jonathan Romain, a minister at Maidenhead Synagogue and founder of inter-faith leaders for Dignity in Dying, who said: 'There is nothing sacred in suffering, nothing holy in agony.'

■ Deputy Louise Doublet said she would be voting for the proposition, adding that there would be an 'opportunity to ensure the appropriate safeguards were put in place' when legislation was brought back before the Assembly.

Responding to concerns from some Members that elderly relatives could feel that they were a burden, she said: 'I hope that the level of concern for the elderly and vulnerable results in some actual cultural change going forwards.'

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Our director Harry is a big fan of the outdoors, especially the sea. He has been surfing since he was 10 and gets in as and when he can. On top of this, he has recently started to compete in long-distance events. Last year he came 10th in the solo category of the double top ultra-marathon (42 miles), 4th in the Sprint Breca, and 2nd as part of a team in the Sark to Jersey swim. Utilising the island to its potential is vital to enjoying it and he is always willing to give advice on what to do and where.