Atitudes to physician and family assisted suicide: results from a study of public attitudes in Britain

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Legalisation of assisted suicide presents a dilemma for society. This arises because of a lack of consensus regarding the precedence to be accorded freedom of choice versus the inviolability of human life. A combination of factors has served to throw this dilemma into sharper focus in recent times. These include population aging, increased openness regarding end-of-life care, development of patients’ rights, and increasing secularisation and multiculturalism in society. Against this backdrop and within a context where several countries have addressed legislation of physician assisted suicide, examination of societal attitudes in Britain seems timely.

Data were extracted from the 1994 British Social Attitudes Survey (BSAS). In this respondents were asked: “Suppose a person had a painful incurable disease. Do you think that doctors should be allowed by law to end the patient’s life, if the patient requests it?” Respondents were then asked: “Still thinking of that same person with the incurable disease. Do you think that someone else, like a close relative should be allowed by law to help end the patient’s life, if the patient requests it?”

Nine hundred and fifty six usable responses relating to physician assisted suicide (PAS) and 957 in relation to family assisted suicide (FAS) were available. Eighty four per cent of respondents supported legalisation of PAS and 95% in relation to family requests it.

AUTHORS’ NOTE
Full description of methodology and results available from C O’Neill on request.

REFERENCES
9 Compassion in dying v State of Washington. 79F 3d 790 (9th Cir 1996); 310–39.