Joffe will amend role for doctors in new bill on assisted dying

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

Joel Joffe, the cross bench peer who introduced a parliamentary bill on assisted dying last year, announced this week that he intends to modify his original proposals on the role of doctors in helping the terminally ill to die.

During a debate on the issue in the House of Lords on Monday, Lord Joffe announced a number of amendments to his initial Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill that would allow doctors to prescribe drugs to patients who wish to use them to die, but not to administer them.

The debate, featuring more than 70 speakers, centred on a report produced in April by the House of Lords select committee that considered the issues raised by Lord Joffe's original bill, which ran out of parliamentary time before it could become law (*BMJ* 2005;330:807).

Lord Joffe told the House of Lords that one of the amendments was that "there will be no

obligation on physicians to raise the possibility of assisted dying with patients and no duty on hospices or hospitals to permit assisted dying on their premises."

"I will include these amendments in a new bill which I propose to introduce after this debate," he said. "The select committee report recommended that in any future bill, a clear distinction should be drawn between assisted dying and voluntary euthanasia.

"Having discussed this recommendation with seven of the 13 members of the committee... I established that all seven would support the principle of a bill which limited its application to assisted suicide, where a patient takes responsibility for the final stage of ending of his or her life."

Lord Joffe said that if his bill became law he anticipated it would result in about 650 deaths a year in England and Wales,

extrapolating from the experience of similar legislation in the US state of Oregon.

During the almost nine hour long debate, Lord John Patten said, "If a bill such as the one proposed... were to pass into law, in future years it would come to be viewed as an event rather like the discovery of nuclear power when used for weapons of mass destruction."

It also meant that provision would be necessary for patients who wished to know what kind of doctor was going to treat them, so they could distinguish between "a doctor who cared to preserve life and a doctor who, in shorthand... was really a 'vet' doctor prepared to take part in the end of life.

"There would need to be separate training, and separate registers of the two classes of doctors would have to be made public," Lord Patten said.

Baroness Ilora Finlay said, "This is a Rubicon that we must not cross. When I was a newly qualified doctor, I thought that we should allow euthanasia, but now I am certain that even physician assisted suicide is too dangerous to adopt."

Many of the peers pointed to the significance of the BMA dropping its resistance to a change in the law when it voted at its annual representative meeting to take a neutral stance and make it a matter for society to decide.

Lord Naren Patel, an obstetrician by background, said that he had initially opposed a change to the law but added, "Although the medical profession is divided on the issue, there is wide consensus that any change in the law must be accompanied by wider availability of good quality palliative care, strong safeguards in the legislation for patients, training and support for health professionals, a robust monitoring of the law, and clear conscientious objection clauses, all of which I would strongly support."

Before the debate, an open letter was sent to parliament by six of the larger faith groups opposing any change in the law in this area, while the Christian Medical Fellowship, which represents 5000 doctors, also voiced its concerns saying physician assisted suicide was just as morally wrong as voluntary euthanasia. □

When other faces fade, Berlusconi's lives on

Fabio Turone *Milan*

The effect of heavy and prolonged propaganda on the human brain might be even stronger than previously thought, according to a case report in the international journal *Cortex* (in press).

The case described a 66 year old Italian housewife with five years of education who found it more and more difficult to recognise her relatives and friends but always recognised the face of the Italian prime minister and media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, whose pervasive political communication has flooded Italy over the past decade.

Neuropsychologists have long recognised that a knowledge of famous people, particularly politicians, such as

Margaret Thatcher, appears remarkably resistant to the effects of brain damage. "However, such reports are, at best, anecdotal, and no stringent experimental evidence is available about them," say neuropsychologists Sara Mondini, from the University of Padua, and Carlo Semenza, from the University of Trieste.

This case was peculiar because the woman had a generalised semantic memory disorder, so that she was totally unable to associate words with images. That was particularly true when she was dealing with natural living entities (such as fruit and vegetables, animals, and faces) that according to the dominant theory in neuropsychology are processed in a peculiar way, different from other memories.

When shown Mr Berlusconi's picture, the patient didn't show a particular affection towards him, but described him as a very rich man, a television station owner, and a politician. The other image she also recognised easily was of the late Karol Wojtyla, Pope John Paul II, who was still

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alive at the time. She identified him as the pope, with a certain emotion in her voice, but was unable to remember his name or distinguish him from former popes. In addition, the recognition was lost after the papal paraphernalia were removed from the picture.

This was not the case with Berlusconi's face, which she recognised even in different contexts: "His face appears to have been turned into a non-living, but very well recognisable,

icon and hence to have been processed just as the pope's conventional image [was] or Christ on the cross," comments Professor Semenza.

But this case may not be the only one. After the Italian media reported this study, Professor Semenza was informed of similar cases: "I was contacted by a colleague from Sicily," he recalls, "who told me that Mr Berlusconi's face is one of the very few images that three Alzheimer patients still recognise." □