

Italy debates end of life decisions

Milan

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An open correspondence between a terminally ill man and the Italian president, Giorgio Napolitano, has spurred a public debate in the country about euthanasia and advance directives and “living wills.”

The letter to the president—entitled “Dear President, I want euthanasia”—was written by Piergiorgio Welby, an Italian of Scottish descent, who has advanced muscular dystrophy and is now confined to bed and attached to a ventilator.

He wrote, “Until two months and a half ago my life was certainly full of difficulties, but for a couple of hours every day, with the help of the computer, I could write, read, research, and meet with some friends over the internet.

“Now I feel like I fell in an abyss and am unable to find a way out. Every day it gets worse; I am increasingly weak and tired. I watch TV, waiting for the time of the lorazepam tablet so I can sleep and feel nothing, hoping I won’t wake up the next morning.”

President Napolitano, who was elected last May by the new centre left coalition government, expressed “sincere understanding and solidarity” and wished for a “sensible and thorough” discussion. He wrote, “I hope there will be such a debate, in the appropriate places, because the only unacceptable attitude would be silence.”

The correspondence brought polarised reactions, even within the centre left coalition. “Denying euthanasia to someone who is lucidly asking for it is pure and simple torture,” said the former health minister and famous oncologist Umberto Veronesi. His research foundation, named after him, is battling for “biological testaments”—similar to advance directives—to be used in Italy.

But the president of the Senate, Franco Marini, a Catholic member of the coalition, warned that “euthanasia is not going to be discussed in the Senate.”

Currently Italian law punishes doctors who practise euthanasia with prison terms of up to 15 years, and decisions about treatment at the end of life are still strongly influenced by the historical opposition of the Catholic church to any act that risks shortening life.

Until 2001 even prescribing opioids was almost impossible for most doctors. Then a law proposed by Professor Veronesi, the then health minister, to make this possible was approved.

A study that compared attitudes in six European countries to withholding treatments that prolong the life of patients who are at the end of life found that Italy has a far lower recorded incidence of cases where the doctor decides not to treat than the other countries (*Archives of Internal Medicine* 2005;165:401-7). In Italy the incidence was 6%, compared with 22% in Sweden, 23% in Denmark, 27% in Belgium, 30% in the Netherlands, and 41% in Switzerland.

Now, despite the turmoil about euthanasia, the Senate's health commission, chaired by the transplantation surgeon Ignazio Marino, has begun to hear the eight bills presented so far about advance directives and life prolonging treatments. The final draft is expected to be voted on by the parliament by March 2007.