

Dear Members of Parliament and Peers,

Acts of love and compassion should not be criminalised.

I wanted to alert you to the broadcast on Tuesday 21st May of the Reith Lectures 2019 with Lord Sumption on BBC Radio 4. I attended the recording of the first lecture, where I was able to talk about my experiences with the current law on assisted dying.

In February, my husband of more than fifty years, Geoffrey, died at Dignitas in Switzerland. He had terminal motor neurone disease and in December was told he had just months left to live. He decided that he wished to control his death rather than suffer a drawn-out, traumatic end. Due to an anonymous tip-off to local authorities that Geoffrey planned to end his life abroad, we were both investigated by police and social services. The day they knocked on our door was the first time I had ever seen Geoffrey cry.

I personally was interviewed under police caution by members of the Thames Valley Police domestic violence team. As I'm sure you can imagine, this was an incredibly distressing experience. I have never been a criminal; I was simply acting out of love for my husband in helping him to achieve the death he wanted. What distressed me most was the concern that we could be prevented from travelling to Switzerland, that Geoffrey could be denied the dignified death he wanted, or that I could not be with him in his final hours.

I asked Lord Sumption, in light of Parliament's continuing refusal to legalise assisted dying despite overwhelming popular support and growing evidence of good practice overseas, where people like me should turn when we are experiencing the effects of this outdated law.

I found his response very troubling: "I think the law should continue to criminalise assisted suicide... and I think that the law should be broken from time to time."

What message does that send to loving families who face criminalisation for helping their nearest and dearest to have the deaths that they want? The answer appears to me to expect – perhaps even encourage – them to simply break the law. For one of our most senior Judges to say it is preferable for the law to be repeatedly broken than for it to be reformed cannot inspire confidence in our legal system.

If Lord Sumption implies the existing law protects vulnerable people, I cannot see how undermining the law achieves that aim. Surely it would be better to draft a new, robust law that ensures dying people can have the deaths they want, and those who do not want this choice or do not qualify for it can be protected by a rigorously safeguarded law that is strictly enforced by the courts and prosecution services.

My family, and many other families like mine, have faced the dreadful consequences of our current law. Dignity in Dying and I are bringing together the experiences of such families with a new campaign, Acts of Love. I was made to feel like a criminal for acting out of love. Others have wanted to act, but without the funds or ability to travel, were unable to. Instead many have had to watch helplessly as their loved ones die in pain, suffering or without

dignity. More families will continue to face these dreadful ends until our law is brought up to date and in line with other countries like the USA, Canada and Australia.

I urge you to listen to Reith lecture broadcast at 9am on BBC Radio 4 on Tuesday, and to let me know if you believe terminally ill, mentally competent people should be able to die on their own terms, in their own country. You can contact me at actsoflove@dignityindying.org.uk.

Compassion is not a crime. MPs have a duty to listen to experiences like mine and Geoffrey's and act to change this broken law.

Yours sincerely,

Ann Whaley