

California's governor has signed a bill legalising doctor-assisted dying



WHEN in September California's lawmakers passed a bill legalising doctor-assisted dying, there were doubts whether it would ever become law. Between success and the statute book stood a possible veto by the state governor, Jerry Brown. Mr Brown is a pious Catholic—and the strongest opposition to doctor-assisted dying in California and elsewhere has come from the Catholic church. But Mr Brown was also known to have talked by phone to Brittany Maynard, a young Californian woman whose diagnosis of terminal brain cancer had turned her into a passionate advocate for the cause. In 2014 she had moved to Oregon, the first American state to legalise doctor-assisted dying, and had taken her own life there. Ms Maynard's widely publicised story, and a moving video she made asking California's lawmakers to pass something similar to Oregon's Death with Dignity law, had transformed the debate in her home state and beyond.

Now the uncertainty is at an end. On October 5th Mr Brown signed the bill—a strong expression of his support, since for it to pass into law the minimum that he needed to do was to decline to veto it. Next year California will thus join Oregon, Vermont, Washington and Montana in allowing doctors, with appropriate safeguards, to prescribe lethal drugs that terminally ill patients can use to end their own lives, if they so choose.

In a plainly worded and moving letter to the California State Assembly, Mr Brown

explained his decision. Having read submissions from both supporters and opponents of the measure, and consulted with a Catholic bishop, two of his own doctors and various friends with widely differing opinions, he said that he was left to reflect on what he would want in the face of his own death. He concluded: "I do not know what I would do if I were dying in prolonged and excruciating pain. I am certain, however, that it would be a comfort to be able to consider the options afforded by this bill. And I wouldn't deny that right to others."

The decision has been criticised by opponents, who say that rather than thinking about how the law would affect people like himself—well-off, white, well-educated—he should have thought about the possible impact on less privileged folk, who might find themselves under pressure from relatives or health-care providers to take a quick and cheap way out. But Mr Brown rejected such paternalism; and there is no evidence from Oregon or the other states that people end up taking their lives under duress. Mr Brown does not say that he is sure he would want a doctor's help in his final hours—just that he thinks that he might, and that therefore others might, too.

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Merciful ends

Support for assisted dying, June 2015, %



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