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U.K. lords vote down assisted-suicide bill

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LONDON — Britain's House of Lords rejected a bill on Friday to allow doctors to prescribe lethal drug doses to terminally ill patients, reflecting opposition among the public, government and church to assisted suicide.

The proposed British law was based largely on legislation in Oregon, the only state in the United States to have legalized assisted suicide. Seven hours of debate on the issue on Friday ranged from spiritual to practical concerns, including Christian theology, the high cost of health care and fears that the measure could become a substitute for quality medical care in Britain.

The 148-100 vote against the measure ends any chance of its passage, as the proposal will not proceed to the lawmaking House of Commons.

Lord Ian McColl, a surgeon, had led opposition and described the proposed law as "morally indefensible and completely unnecessary."

Both euthanasia and assisted suicide are illegal in Britain. The Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill bill would have permitted doctors to prescribe drugs that a terminally ill person could take to end his or her own life.

Proponents of new laws highlighted cases in which terminally ill Britons had traveled to Switzerland, where authorities allow passive assistance to terminally ill people who have expressed a wish to die.

The Netherlands became the first country to legalize euthanasia in 2001. Belgium legalized it under strict conditions in 2002. In the United States, the Supreme Court recently ruled that the federal government cannot interfere by punishing doctors who prescribe lethal doses of drugs to terminally ill people.

"As a caring society, we cannot sit back and complacently accept that terminally ill patients suffering unbearably should just continue to suffer for the good of society as a whole," said Lord Joel Joffe, who proposed new laws in 2003.

But Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, who led a group of bishops to the chamber to oppose the measure, said the religious community had both theological and practical objections.

A group called Care Not Killing delivered a petition to Prime Minister Tony Blair's office Wednesday, signed by more than 100,000 people, asking that the law not be changed.

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