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Belgium passes law extending euthanasia to children of all ages

Parliament votes 86-44 in favour of including terminally ill 'unbearably suffering' children under euthanasia legislation

Associated Press in Brussels

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Belgian lawmakers have voted overwhelmingly to extend the country's euthanasia law to children under the age of 18. The 86-44 vote in the House of Representatives, on Thursday, with 12 abstentions, followed approval by the senate in December.

The law lifts Belgium's age restrictions on euthanasia and can sanction it where children have a terminal and incurable illness, are near death, and suffering "constant and unbearable physical" pain, and where parents and professionals agree to the choice.

The law was opposed by some Belgian paediatricians and the country's leading Roman Catholic cleric.

The law will come into effect when signed by Belgium's monarch, King Philippe, who is not expected to oppose the measure.

The decision to proceed with each proposal of euthanasia will also have to be agreed by a treating physician and an outsider brought in to give a second opinion.

Children will have to be interviewed by a paediatric psychiatrist or psychologist, who must determine that the child possesses "the capacity of discernment", and then certify that in writing.

The child's physician must meet the parents or legal representatives to inform them of the outcome of the consultation and ensure they are in agreement with the child's decision. The request for euthanasia, as well as the agreement by parents or legal representatives, must be delivered in writing, and the child and family must be given psychological care if wanted.

Gerlant van Berlaer, a paediatric critical care specialist at University Hospital Brussels, suggested that any steps towards euthanasia could take weeks or months.

A federal commission, half of whose 16 members are medical doctors, was created by the euthanasia law passed in 2002 to examine all cases of euthanasia in Belgium and to ensure the procedures established were respected.

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