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Dutch paediatricians: give terminally ill children under 12 the right to die

Dutch Paediatric Association says country should follow Belgium in changing law on euthanasia and scrapping age limit for children in unbearable suffering

Agence France-Presse in The Hague

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Terminally ill children in unbearable suffering should be given the right to die, the Dutch Paediatric Association has said, calling for the current age limit of 12 years old to be scrapped.

Eduard Verhagen, a paediatrics professor at Groningen University, who is on the organisation's ethics commission, said: "We feel that an arbitrary age limit such as 12 should be changed and that each child's ability to ask to die should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis."

Children in the Netherlands aged 12 or over can request euthanasia if they are terminally ill, suffering unbearably, able to express their will and have parental approval.

Verhagen said: “If a child under 12 satisfies the same conditions, paediatricians are currently powerless. It’s time to address this problem.”

Dutch paediatricians want a commission to be set up to examine the question further.

A change in the law would bring the Netherlands in line with Belgium, which in 2014 became the first country in the world to pass a law allowing euthanasia for a young child who has the “discernment” necessary to decide to give up life.

The Belgian law offers the possibility of euthanasia to children “in a hopeless medical situation of constant and unbearable suffering that cannot be eased and which will cause death in the short-term”.

Counselling by doctors and a psychiatrist or psychologist is required, as is parental approval.

Belgian paediatricians said in 2013 that “in cases of serious illness and imminent death, minors develop very quickly a great maturity, to the point where they are often better able to reflect and express themselves on life than healthy people”.

Verhagen said five children were euthanised in the Netherlands between 2002 and 2015: a 12-year-old and four young people aged 16 to 17.

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