

Dignitas: Swiss suicide helpers

Swiss charity Dignitas has gained a worldwide reputation for helping people with chronic diseases to end their lives.

Since it was founded in 1998, it has helped hundreds of people from across Europe to commit suicide.

This includes more than 110 people from the UK, the first of who was Reg Crew, in January 2003.

The organisation was founded by Swiss lawyer, Ludwig Minelli, who runs it as a non-profit organisation with the motto: "Live with dignity, die with dignity".

WHAT THE LAW SAYS

- Assisting a suicide carries a maximum sentence of 14 years imprisonment in England and Wales
- None of the UK cases handled by Dignitas has so far involved any criminal charges, but many have resulted in police investigations
- Several European countries have no crime of assisting a suicide: Switzerland, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Germany, Sweden and Finland

It takes advantage of Switzerland's liberal laws on assisted suicide, which suggest that a person can only be prosecuted if they are acting out of self-interest.

The law on suicide actually states:

"Whoever lures someone into suicide or provides assistance to commit suicide out of a self-interested motivation will, on completion of the suicide, be punished with up to five years' imprisonment".

Dignitas interprets this to mean that anyone who assists suicide altruistically cannot be punished.

Its specialist staff all work as volunteers to ensure there can be no conflict of interest.

They engage in detailed discussion about whether the patient's determination to die falls within the legal boundaries, and whether it is indeed the declared will of the patient.

Dignitas also provides a text for patients, which states their wish for assisted suicide in terms which cannot be misconstrued and which allows them to carry out their wishes even in the face of opposition, if necessary.

Once the decision has been made, the patient travels to Zurich where he or she is taken to a Dignitas flat.

The patient is given an anti-sickness drug 30 minutes before the lethal dose of barbiturate.

Controversy

OPINIONS ON SUICIDE LAWS

It is... absurd that on an issue so crucial attitudes are increasingly determined by a private clinic in Switzerland.

This law is designed to protect the weak and the vulnerable from unscrupulous family members.

A camera is set up to record the patient take the drug themselves - firm evidence that it was not administered by clinic staff.

The barbiturate is a colourless solution, bitter tasting, and comes in a portion like a small glass of sherry.

The dose is three times the normal lethal amount required, based on the patient's weight.

The patient drinks it and then may take a sip of orange juice.

Within five minutes they lapse into a coma, and the heart stops soon afterwards, apparently leading to a peaceful and painless death.

The police are then called, a coroner comes, they question the witnesses and look at the video.

In his first broadcast interview for five years, Mr Minelli told the BBC earlier this year that he was motivated by helping people.

"I say suicide is a marvellous possibility given to a human being... to escape a situation which you can't alter."

But the group's activities have stirred up controversy.

Swiss politicians have voiced concerns about the organisation's interpretation of the law.

Despite this, Dignitas has insisted it is right and has even called for the law to be clarified for the healthy partners of dying people.

Dignitas has also been criticised for accepting people who are not necessarily terminally ill.

It helped 23-year-old Daniel James commit suicide last year after he was paralysed while playing rugby.

The handling of such cases has prompted resignations by staff at the clinic.

UK mental health charity Sane said Dignitas was offering a "seductive but dangerous solution to the feelings of anguish and hopelessness experienced by some people with mental illness".

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<http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/1/hi/health/4643196.stm>

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