

FACTSHEET 20: Assisted Suicide in Switzerland

1. Since 1937 assisted suicide has been governed by Articles 114 and 115 of the Penal Code, whereby it is not an offence if there is no personal motive or gain for those providing assistance. However Article 114 precludes medical decisions to shorten life, as well as voluntary euthanasia.
2. Although legal, assisted suicide is considered beyond the scope of medical practice by the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences. Although they are the most suitably qualified to assist, doctors may not aid the suicides of hopelessly and terminally ill patients. Four Right to Die organisations have formed as a response to this situation. These are EXIT Switzerland, EXIT International, DIGNITAS, and EXIT / ADMD (Suisse Romande).
3. EXIT, the Swiss Society for Humane Dying with a membership of 50,000, was created in 1982 and has German and French speaking branches. It has established a strict protocol under which people may be legally assisted to commit suicide.
 - Applicants must be 18 years of age or older, medically competent, a member of EXIT and a resident of Switzerland.
 - They must be seriously ill and / or unbearably suffering with poor prognosis, and wishing to die with assistance from EXIT.
 - Diagnosis and prognosis must be confirmed by a doctor. In doubtful cases a team comprising a lawyer, doctor and psychiatrist makes a joint decision.
 - The EXIT protocol requires that the patient must personally make contact with EXIT headquarters.
 - An EXIT team member visits the patient to assess the circumstances and establish a lack of coercion. A date for the assisted suicide is determined.
 - The patient obtains written documentation concerning diagnosis and prognosis from their doctor. Independent assessment from an EXIT doctor (or in collaboration) may be offered.
 - An EXIT team member visits the patient to give assistance and stays with the patient until death. A witness, usually a close relative, stays with the patient throughout the process.
 - The team member provides a relaxant and half an hour later the medication to induce death, which usually occurs within two hours. Police are notified immediately after death; a subsequent investigation is then initiated by the prosecution attorney to establish the legality of action.

Approximately 120 people are assisted each year.

4. EXIT International, headed by Rev Rolf Sigg (D Phil) has members who will travel throughout Europe to assist suicides. Due to language difficulties only German speaking patients are currently helped.
5. DIGNITAS, based in Zurich and headed by attorney Ludwig Minelli, also assists members who are foreigners. The organisation has 1700 members, 1000 of whom live outside the country.
6. EXIT ADMD (Suisse Romande) is a French-speaking Association with approximately 10,000 members. Based in Geneva, it offers assistance in suicides to members who are living in Switzerland upon 4 conditions:
 - discernment
 - repeated serious request
 - incurable illness or terminal prognosis
 - intolerable physical or psychological suffering

References:

1. Professor Meinrad Schaer MD, President EXIT Society for Humane Dying, Switzerland. (Paper delivered 16th Dec 1996 at the 11th conference of World Federation of Right to Die Societies, Melbourne.)
2. Dr Derek Humphrey, Euthanasia Research and Guidance Organisation (ERGO)'Swiss assisted suicide branching out' 22nd July 2001.
3. Klaus Hotz, 'Legal situation in Switzerland' - paper delivered at the World Federation of Right to Die Societies Conference, Brussels Sept 2002.
4. EXIT ADMD info@exit-geneve.ch