

Zurich-Forch, 15 January 2019

A note from DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity

Progress and challenges: review of the year 2018 and outlook for 2019

In 2018, the general advisory work and suicide attempt prevention remained an important part of the activities of the non-profit member society DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity. In the frame of its legal and political efforts, DIGNITAS wrote several submissions for consultations, and supported and accompanied court cases and political advances in Switzerland and beyond. On 17 May 2018, DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity celebrated its twentieth anniversary.¹ The number of DIGNITAS' members increases continually, whilst the number of accompanied suicides remains stable. In 2019, DIGNITAS will continue to engage in quality of life until the end, self-determination and real freedom of choice, combined with individual responsibility and advance planning.

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity is a non-profit member society. Through its activities it empowers people to self-determinedly shape their life in regard of health and end of life and moreover to decide on the manner and time of their own end in life. This is especially significant in countries where such freedom does not yet exist. With open-outcome advisory work on suicide attempt prevention, advance directives, palliative care and accompanied suicide DIGNITAS offers its members, their families, and others who are interested the necessary basis for decision-making. The DIGNITAS team consists of 24 part-time employees in advisory work, accompanying, member administration, bookkeeping and the board. Additionally, the association is supported by several external experts in the fields of medicine, law, IT and auditing.

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¹ <http://www.dignitas.ch/images/stories/pdf/medienmitteilung-18052018.pdf>

Advisory work and suicide attempt prevention

Suicide attempt prevention is at the heart of the comprehensive advisory work of DIGNITAS. Only by taking a person seriously in his or her desire to end their suffering and life for whatever reason, only by openly exploring all options and offering a real emergency exit and thus enabling an open-outcome conversation is it possible to prevent a rise in the pressures resulting from hopelessness and despair which could otherwise lead someone to attempt a high-risk lonely suicide. Only unprejudiced and comprehensive advisory work has a suicide attempt preventative effect. This approach was met with great interest at the Forum Suicide Prevention “Understanding Suicide”² which DIGNITAS attended in 2018 and which led to a valuable exchange with other experts in the field of suicide prevention.

A large part of DIGNITAS’ work is counselling people who get in touch in writing or by telephone, and for a variety of reasons. Every day, DIGNITAS receives dozens of e-mails, letters and calls. About one third of the daily telephone advisory work is provided to non-members who receive a free-of-charge initial consultation. This counselling focuses on showing people ways to improve their quality of life and their options at life’s end. Accompanied suicide is only one topic among others. It is, so to speak, an “emergency exit” for those who have exhausted other options (for example palliative care measures, further therapies, etc) or who do not wish to make use of them at all or anymore.

Legal and political work

In modern, industrialised states, a large part of the population supports self-determination in life and at life’s end.³ The human right and freedom of every individual to decide on the manner and time of his or her own end of life was confirmed, in principle, by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court in 2006 and the European Court of Human Rights in 2011. To help enforce this on an international level, 230,000 Swiss Francs of Dignitas’ income was used to fund further legal developments through national and international court cases as well as consultation proceedings with regard to self-determination in life and at life’s end. As part of this work, submissions were made to the Swiss Academy of Medical Science,⁴ the Joint Select Committee of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council of the Parliament of Western Australia,⁵ etc.

In addition, DIGNITAS supports the work of other organisations and research projects. In 2018, for example, DIGNITAS assisted the process for the legal acknowledgment of health care advance directives in South Africa.

The entire legal-political work of DIGNITAS (court decisions, reports, submissions, comments, etc) is documented at www.dignitas.ch.

Quality Management

DIGNITAS attaches great importance to quality in all of its processes. The auditing firm BDO AG, which is also the organisation’s official controlling body, carried out a review of the 2017

² <http://www.ipsilon.ch/de/aktuell/rueckblick.cfm>

³ Europe for example: http://www.medizinalrecht.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Results_opinion_poll_self-determination_at_the_end_of_life.pdf

⁴ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26&Itemid=6&lang=de

⁵ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26&Itemid=6&lang=en

annual financial statements of DIGNITAS and found them to be without fault. The auditing complements the activities of an independent tax lawyer, as well as the tax authorities, which monitor DIGNITAS' bookkeeping.

At the beginning of 2017, the 7th Report on Quality Control of DIGNITAS Services in Relation to Accompanied Suicide was published. Just like the previous reports, it ensures transparency and contains both praise and criticism.⁶ Work on the next report is in progress.

Public Relations Work

DIGNITAS' public relations work serves primarily to inform and educate interested parties about suicide attempt prevention, safeguarding quality of life and self-determination at life's end, both online and in direct dialogue through discussions and speeches in Switzerland and abroad. It is aimed at schools for health and social care as well as professionals in medicine and law, and also to a wider public.

In 2018, DIGNITAS representatives gave many speeches in Germany, Sweden, Austria, South Africa and Switzerland, participated in several panel discussions and conferences, and received visits by several different experts.

The support of several documentaries and academic papers are part of this engagement just as much as responding to uncountable inquiries by school pupils, undergraduates, PhD students, etc. DIGNITAS' know-how is being appreciated internationally and made use of.

DIGNITAS publishes a newsletter four times a year, both in English and German, to which 15,000 people have signed up; registering to receive it regularly is possible on the DIGNITAS-website.⁷ DIGNITAS is also present on Facebook and Twitter.⁸

Members

The number of members of DIGNITAS has grown steadily. As of the end of 2018, DIGNITAS has over 9,000 members.⁹ People who become members at DIGNITAS do not usually do so because they want to die, but because they want to support the broad activities of the association and to have the safety of choice. Fewer than 3% of all DIGNITAS members made use of an accompanied suicide in 2018.

Advisory work, as well as preparing and carrying out an accompanied suicide is very labour-intensive and complex, especially with individuals from abroad. The costs associated with it cannot always be fully borne by the members themselves. Sometimes, even the 80 Swiss Francs annual membership subscription is a hurdle. As a charitable non-profit member society DIGNITAS is open to all persons, irrespective of their financial situation. If need be, based on its statutes, DIGNITAS reduces or even completely waives fees on reasoned request. In 2018, DIGNITAS granted 123,000 Swiss Francs in reduction of fees.

Since 2012, the number of accompanied suicides at DIGNITAS has been stable at around 200 persons per year. In 2018, there was no significant change in this: with 221 accompanied suicides, the number is basically the same as the year before (222).¹⁰ In recent years, fewer than

⁶ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24&Itemid=64&lang=en

⁷ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_mad4joomla&jid=25&Itemid=160&lang=en

⁸ direct URL: <https://www.facebook.com/dignitas.ch> and https://twitter.com/DIGNITAS_org

⁹ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32&Itemid=72&lang=en

¹⁰ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32&Itemid=72&lang=en

50% of all DIGNITAS members whose request for an accompanied suicide was assessed by a Swiss physician independent of DIGNITAS actually chose to make use of their “last human right”.

Outlook on 2019

Quality of life until the end, self-determination and real freedom of choice, combined with individual responsibility and advance planning are values which are not available as a matter of course. Basic freedoms and human rights have to be repeatedly defended against paternalistic forces. There are repeated attempts by mostly religiously affiliated and, increasingly, foreign moralists to put power over questions of life and death even more firmly in the hands of medicine and politics. These self-proclaimed experts and alleged pro-lifers hide behind politics and research projects such as the NRP 67"¹¹ as well as “ethics committees” with the aim of introducing “regulations” – in reality hurdles – against human rights, patient autonomy and the self-determination of citizens. In 2019, DIGNITAS will continue to engage in work for suicide attempt prevention, a dignified life and dying, and for the protection of real freedom of choice in “last matters”.

Summary

Date of founding of the member society:	17 May 1998
Employees:	24
Members as of end of 2018:	9,000 (incl. DIGNITAS-Germany)
Accompanied suicides in 2018:	221 (one less compared to previous year)
Investment in international legal further development:	CHF 230,000
Minimum annual subscription 2019:	CHF 80
Membership fee for an accompanied suicide:	CHF 2,500 (exception: reduction / exemption)
Reduction and exemption of fees in 2018:	CHF 123,000
Donations in 2018:	CHF 74,800

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e-mail to: info@dignitas.ch web: www.dignitas.ch



¹¹ <http://www.nfp67-check.info/en/home.html>

BACKGROUND:

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity was founded in May 1998 with the aim, through international legal and political work, to make the proven Swiss model of freedom of choice, self-determination and personal responsibility in life and at life's end also accessible to individuals abroad.

DIGNITAS's advisory concept – combining palliative care, suicide attempt prevention, advance directives/decisions and assisted dying – offers a basis for good decision-making to shape life until the end.

Through litigation, DIGNITAS obtained a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in 2011 acknowledging the right/freedom of a competent individual to decide on the manner and time of his or her own end in life and confirming this to be protected by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

DIGNITAS has been engaged in many lawsuits in Europe and Canada, and has provided in-depth submissions and received visits by expert and parliamentary committees from Great Britain, Australia, Canada, etc. when laws were discussed and planned for the protection of a patient's autonomy and human dignity.

The founder of the charitable DIGNITAS organisation is Ludwig A. Minelli, an attorney-at-law specialising in human rights. The team of DIGNITAS consists of 24 part-time employees and it is supported by several external experts in the fields of medicine, law, IT and auditing.