

Zurich-Forch, 18 May 2018

A note from

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity

Twenty years “DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity”

On Thursday 17 May 2018 the non-profit member society “DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity” celebrated its twentieth anniversary. In the twenty years of its operation the member society has seen significant success in relation to freedom of choice and self-determination in life and life’s end.

The starting point: suicide attempt prevention

On 16 May 1998, the general assembly of Exit (Swiss German part) in Zürich took place. The director of Exit at the time, Peter Holenstein, had proposed to the board of Exit that the organisation should engage in the reduction of the number of suicides and suicide attempts. With an aim to deselect Holenstein, circles around the board arranged for some 300 Exit members to additionally attend the general assembly. Peter Holenstein was booed down and his fellow combatant Ludwig A. Minelli, at the time legal counsellor of the director of Exit, had no chance to speak at the assembly. The proposal went down in the noise and Holenstein was deselected.

Having lost, that small group of visionaries decided to stick to the concept of suicide attempt prevention and, in the light of the circumstances, to realise it in a new member society. Overnight, Ludwig A. Minelli wrote the statutes, and on Sunday 17 May 1998 the member society “DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity” was founded. One day later, the organisation was operational already.

Since then, other organisations have copied the DIGNITAS concept of suicide attempt prevention. Today, suicide attempt prevention is an acknowledged part of the activities of assisted dying organisations, just as much as advisory work for palliative care, advance healthcare directives, etc.

In its publication “National Strategy Palliative Care 2013-2015”, referring to the Federal Council report “Palliative care, suicide prevention and organised assistance with suicide” of June 2011, the Swiss Federal Office of Public Health FOPH states that [in Switzerland]

“...nowadays, in society primarily suicide assistance organisations are seen to be a possibility to ensure self-determination at the end of life”. DIGNITAS is the pioneer of this development.

Milestones

DIGNITAS noted a significant success on 3 November 2006: in the court case of a DIGNITAS-member, the Swiss Federal Supreme Court confirmed what Ludwig A. Minelli had pointed out earlier in an essay in the legal professional journal *“Allgemeine Juristische Praxis AJP”*: the Court acknowledged the right of an individual to decide about the manner and time of his or her own end in life as a guaranteed fundamental European right, and that this would also apply to individuals suffering from a psychiatric illness. The case was taken further to the European Court of Human Rights which confirmed this key ruling on 20 January 2011. Through this, DIGNITAS effected that the freedom and right to decide on one’s own end in life has been acknowledged as a human right for the first time.

On 15 May 2011 DIGNITAS celebrated a double victory in a Zürich Cantonal people’s vote: the people of Zürich confirmed by 85% and 78% respectively the activities in the field of accompanied suicide as well as the efforts to grant this option to individuals from outside Switzerland.

A further important success for DIGNITAS was the decision of the Federal Administrative Court of Germany (Bundesverwaltungsgericht) in Leipzig on 2 March 2017. The Court acknowledged that severely ill individuals should not be barred from access to the means for ending one’s suffering and life by one’s own action. At the same time, the highest German Administrative Court acknowledged the right of a severely and incurably ill individual to decide on time and manner of his or her end in life. DIGNITAS spent many years working on this case and, with this decision, broke down the wall built on paternalism and violation of human rights which had been set up by German politics in 2015

International and national legal further development

Internationally and nationally DIGNITAS received increasing recognition. Already in 2004, DIGNITAS welcomed a delegation of the House of Lords of the “Select Committee on Assisted Dying for the Terminally Ill Bill” who wished to learn from the experience of DIGNITAS with regard to legalisation of assisted dying in the UK. Representatives of commissions from Canada, Australia and further countries followed. DIGNITAS engages nationally and internationally in public inquiries for law projects, Parliamentary debates, preparing court cases, and so on.

The most recent success with the contribution of DIGNITAS has been the vote of the Parliament of Victoria, Australia to introduce the “Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill”. Earlier, Canada legalised assisted dying after DIGNITAS participated in a leading court case which led the Canadian Supreme Court to find the prohibition of assisted suicide to be unconstitutional.

DIGNITAS is the spearhead of a movement which advocates for people one day not having to travel from abroad to Switzerland for an accompanied suicide anymore. The goal of DIGNITAS: to become unnecessary.

Ready for the next twenty years

DIGNITAS looks back on twenty successful years, in which the member society reached much more than what was dreamt of on 17 May 1998. Experts in politics, law and medicine, as well as students, researchers and others, more call on the experience and expertise of DIGNITAS. DIGNITAS is connected worldwide with organisations which have similar goals and which advocate for real quality of life until the end.

The board of DIGNITAS and the over twenty part-time employees, as well as supportive external experts from diverse fields, lead the member society into the future. Creativity, engagement and an immense socio-political, legal and medical know-how make DIGNITAS an unique organisation and allow it to reach goals that other organisations can benefit from.

“DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity” says thank you to all members, supporters, employees and co-thinkers for their loyalty and the power they give the organisation to implement the idea of real freedom of choice and self-determination combined with self-responsibility in life and life’s end internationally. DIGNITAS also says thank you to its opponents who challenged the organisation again and again, even though they sometimes tried to paralyse the organisation with dubious methods: through each of their attacks DIGNITAS grew bigger and stronger.

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BACKGROUND:

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity was founded in May 1998 with the aim to advocate, educate and support for improving care and choice in life and at life's end and to bring the Swiss option of legal assisted dying to other countries so that people outside Switzerland will not have to make use of DIGNITAS' services anymore.

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 time and manner 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 and law.