



Zurich-Forch, 24 January 2018

A note from

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity

Progress and challenges: review of the year 2017 and outlook for 2018

In 2017, 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. DIGNITAS’ legal and political work led to important success in Germany, Australia and Italy. The number of DIGNITAS’ members increases continually, whilst the number of accompanied suicides remains stable. In 2018, DIGNITAS will continue to defend values such as 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 gives people the possibility to decide on manner and time of their own end in life – especially those who do not (yet) have this in their own country. 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 and law.

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 it is 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 such honest and comprehensive advisory work has a suicide attempt preventive effect. This approach was met with great interest at the Forum Suicide Prevention “suicide-attempt-preventing”¹ which DIGNITAS attended in 2017 and which led to a valuable exchange with other experts in the field of suicide prevention.

A large part of DIGNITAS’ work is counselling persons who get in touch in writing or by telephone 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

¹ <http://www.ipsilon.ch/de/aktuell/agenda.cfm>

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 all 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 Western Europe and other modern states, a large part of the population supports self-determination in life and at life's end,² whether that is assisted suicide or active euthanasia (which is forbidden in Switzerland). To enforce on an international level the right and freedom of every individual to decide on the time and manner of his or her own end of life, as confirmed, in principle, by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court in 2006 and the European Court of Human Rights in 2011, 270,000 Swiss Francs of DIGNITAS' income funded further legal developments through national and international court cases with regard to self-determination in life and at life's end.

A significant success of this engagement was the landmark decision of 2 March 2017 of the Federal Administrative Court of Germany in Leipzig. After a court battle that took almost 13 years through many levels of jurisdiction, that court acknowledged the right of a severely and incurably ill individual not only to personally decide how and when he or she wishes to die but also that access to an appropriate substance to put this decision into practice, at least in exceptional cases, shall not be denied.³

A further important success was the vote of the Parliament of Victoria, Australia, approving the "Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill" on 29 November 2017: the new law gives severely ill residents of the State of Victoria access to physician-supported assisted suicide. In the law-making process, DIGNITAS provided two submissions and personally welcomed members of the Legal and Social Issues Committee of the Victorian Parliament investigating the issue.⁴

In addition, DIGNITAS supports the work of other organisations including, in 2017, the legal acceptance of the Advance Directive (Living Will) in Italy, and the publication of the report "The True Costs - How the UK outsources death to DIGNITAS".⁵

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. In April 2017, the auditing firm BDO AG, which is also the organisation's official controlling body, carried out a review of the 2016 annual financial statements of DIGNITAS and found them to be without fault. The review complements the activities of an independent tax lawyer, as well as the tax authorities, which monitor DIGNITAS' bookkeeping.

² Europe for example: http://www.medizinalrecht.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Results_opinion_poll_self-determination_at_the_end_of_life.pdf

³ <http://www.bverwg.de/020317U3C19.15.0> ; see also: <http://www.dignitas.ch/images/stories/pdf/medienmitteilung-08032017.pdf>

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

⁵ https://features.dignityindying.org.uk/true-cost-dignitas/?utm_source=homepage&utm_medium=homepage

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

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 mainly at schools for health and social care as well as experts in medicine and law, sometimes also to a wider public.

In 2017, DIGNITAS representatives gave over a dozen speeches in Germany, Austria, Italy and Switzerland, participated in several panel discussions and conferences and received, amongst others, visits by a team of palliative care doctors from Denmark.

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

Members

The number of members of DIGNITAS has grown steadily in recent years. As of the end of 2017, DIGNITAS had over 8,400 members. 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 2017.

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 2017, DIGNITAS granted 126,000 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 2017, there was no significant change in this: with 222 accompanied suicides, the number is the same as in 2015. In recent years, fewer than 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 2018

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.

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

For about five years, pressure from mostly religiously affiliated and increasingly foreign self-proclaimed experts, moralists and alleged pro-lifers has been on the rise in Switzerland. They infiltrate “academies”, “ethics committees” and research projects such as the “NRP 67”⁷ with the aim of limiting patient autonomy and the self-determination of citizens by means of new obstacles, thus trying to put power over questions of life and death [even] more firmly in the hands of medicine and politics.

In 2018, DIGNITAS will continue to advocate, educate and support for improving care and choice in life and at life's end, engage in work towards suicide attempt prevention, palliative care, advance directives and assisted dying, and defend values such as quality of life until the end, self-determination and real freedom of choice, combined with individual responsibility and advance planning.

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BACKGROUND:

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity was founded in May 1998 with the aim 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 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.

⁷ <http://www.nfp67-check.info/en/home.html>