

Zurich-Forch, 29 January 2020

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

Progress and challenges: review of the year 2019 and outlook for 2020

In 2019, 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 national and international legal and political efforts, DIGNITAS wrote several submissions for political consultations and initiated, supported and accompanied court cases as well as political advances. In 2019, the number of members continued to grow and reached 9,822. Still fewer than 3% of all DIGNITAS members make use of an accompanied suicide; 256 individuals in 2019. In 2020, 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 28 part-time employees in advisory work, accompanying, member administration, bookkeeping, law and politics, 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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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.

In 2019, DIGNITAS was again present at the “Forum Suizidprävention”¹ by “IPSILON – Initiative zur Prävention von Suizid in der Schweiz” (Initiative for the Prevention of Suicide in Switzerland), which led to a valuable exchange with other experts in this field.

A large part of DIGNITAS’ work is advising persons who, for a variety of reasons, get in touch in writing or by telephone. Every day, DIGNITAS receives dozens of e-mails, letters and calls from all over the world. About one third of the daily telephone advisory work is provided to non-members who thus receive a free-of-charge initial consultation. This advisory work 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 (or no longer) wish to make use of them.

Legal and political work

DIGNITAS persistently pursued its international legal and political activities in 2019. 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 human right on an international level, 153,000 Swiss Francs of DIGNITAS’ income was used to fund further legal development through national and international court cases as well as political consultation proceedings with regard to self-determination in life and at life’s end. In 2019, DIGNITAS made a submission to the Joint Committee on End of Life Choices of the Parliament of South Australia and participated in the public consultation regarding a law on advance decisions and dying in place for Hong Kong.²

DIGNITAS is also actively involved in a number of court cases with the aim of giving citizens more freedom in "last" matters. Austria deserves special mention, where in June 2019 a Viennese lawyer filed a constitutional court complaint on behalf of DIGNITAS, with the aim of having the current criminal law provisions reviewed to see whether these violate, at least in part, the constitutionally guaranteed rights of citizens. In Germany, DIGNITAS is a plaintiff before the Federal Constitutional Court in a case questioning the constitutionality of § 217 of the German Criminal Law, which took effect in December 2015. In Italy, the Constitutional Court ruled in 2019 that assisted suicide is not punishable in certain cases. DIGNITAS played an advisory role in the court case leading to that ruling.

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

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

² http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=26&Itemid=6&lang=en

Quality Management

DIGNITAS attaches great importance to quality in all of its processes. These are continuously reviewed and adjusted as necessary. In addition to the customary examination of each assisted suicide in Switzerland by the public prosecutor's office in cooperation with the police and forensic service, DIGNITAS, following each assisted suicide, submits a standardised questionnaire to the persons involved to gather feedback, criticism and praise. The questionnaires are analysed and published in quality reports.³

The auditing firm BDO AG, which is also the organisation's official controlling body, carried out a review of the 2018 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.

Public Relations Work

In most Western countries, the vast majority of the population wishes to have access to professionally supported accompanied suicide.⁴ To this day, many national laws, jurisdiction and the health system do not sufficiently take this wish into consideration. DIGNITAS contributes to remedy this situation by providing information and advice to political decision-makers, public officials, private institutions and the public.

DIGNITAS' comprehensive know-how on suicide attempt prevention, safeguarding quality of life and self-determination at life's end is being appreciated and drawn upon both in Switzerland and abroad. In addition to the daily comprehensive and open-outcome advisory work for individuals seeking help, DIGNITAS makes its experience from 21 years of international efforts available to interested parties in Switzerland and abroad, through presentations, lectures, submissions etc. In 2019, DIGNITAS representatives gave speeches in Switzerland, Germany, the UK and Sweden; they participated in panel discussions and conferences and received visits by experts and delegations from Switzerland and abroad.

Providing supporting information for specialized articles, reports and documentaries are part of this engagement, just as much as responding to uncountable inquiries by school pupils, undergraduates, PhD students, doctorates, researchers etc.

DIGNITAS distributes a newsletter four times a year, both in English and German, to over 15,000 subscribers; signing up is possible on the DIGNITAS website.⁵ DIGNITAS is also present on Facebook and Twitter.⁶

DIGNITAS has refrained in principle from advertising since its foundation 21 years ago.

Members

The number of DIGNITAS members continued to grow. As of the end of 2019, DIGNITAS counted 9,822 members.⁷

³ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=24&Itemid=64&lang=en

⁴ Europe for example: http://www.medizinalrecht.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/Meinungsumfrageergebnisse_Selbstbestimmung_am_Lebensende.pdf

⁵ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_mad4joomla&jid=25&Itemid=160&lang=en

⁶ direct URL: <https://www.facebook.com/dignitas.ch> and https://twitter.com/DIGNITAS_org

⁷ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32&Itemid=72&lang=en

Individuals 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. Still fewer than 3% of all DIGNITAS members made use of an accompanied suicide; 256 individuals in 2019. Despite the increasing number of members, the number of accompanied suicides at DIGNITAS has not changed significantly since 2015, when 222 members exercised this right of self-determination.⁸ 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”.

Advisory work, as well as preparing and carrying out an accompanied suicide is very labour-intensive and complex, especially with individuals from outside Switzerland. 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 2019, DIGNITAS granted 123,300 Swiss Francs in reduction of fees.

Outlook on 2020

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. In many countries religiously affiliated moralists, self-proclaimed experts and alleged pro-lifers take every opportunity to deny citizens human rights, patient autonomy and self-determination, putting power over questions of life and death even more firmly in the hands of the church, medicine and politics. In Switzerland too, fundamental freedoms and human rights have to be defended and enforced again and again in order to counter conservative and patronising forces. In 2020, DIGNITAS will continue its work for implementing and safe-guarding self-determination and genuine freedom of choice “in last matters”, for the prevention of suicide attempts and for a dignified life and end in life in general.

Summary

Date of foundation of the member society:	17 May 1998
Employees as of end of 2019:	28
Members as of end of 2019:	9,822 (incl. DIGNITAS-Germany)
Accompanied suicides in 2019:	256
Investment in international legal further development 2019:	CHF 153,000
Reduction and exemption of fees in 2019:	CHF 123,300
Minimum annual subscription:	CHF 80
Membership fee for an accompanied suicide:	CHF 2,500 (exception: reduction / exemption)
Donations in 2019:	CHF 36,400

⁸ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32&Itemid=72&lang=en

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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' 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 28 part-time employees and it is supported by several external experts in the fields of medicine, law, IT and auditing.