

REPORT OF THE “ALT SUICIDE” GROUP

INTRODUCTION & SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This is a report from an *ad hoc* group of men and women who are involved in the right-to-die movement. It grew out of the biannual meeting of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies held in Chicago, U.S.A., September 18-20, 2014. Near the end of the conference Bill Simmons (Hemlock Society of San Diego) asked for volunteers to work with him to find a substitute for the word “suicide” when applied to people exercising their “right to die” (RTD) when terminally ill, suffering greatly, fearing progressive dementia, or a full life is over and living is a burden. The group called itself the “Alt Suicide” Group.

While most of the group lives in the United States, it did include people from the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and the Netherlands. Attachment 1 lists the 17 members. Most were active throughout the process, which lasted until March 2015. All work was done via email in English.

This quest was based on the assumption that it is not “suicide” in the traditional sense when a cogent, non-depressed person, usually elderly, chooses to die in a non-violent manner with family in attendance and/or in support. Our opponents loudly proclaim that such self-taking of life is simply “suicide.”

SUMMARY

The group began working with a list of 31 words and phrases (Attachment 2) that the members thought should be considered. It also sought new, made-up words and acronyms. No potential acronyms were proposed that members thought worth pursuing, but the word “dignicide” was suggested by Lenn Bernstein. Some members believe it is the best possible new terminology.

During a process of discussion and voting the list of potential terms was reduced to five: “self-deliverance,” “dying/death with dignity¹,” “rational suicide,” “humane, self-chosen death,” and “dignicide.” The group did not reach consensus on one of these terms.

¹ “Dying with dignity” is the name of several right-to-die organizations which are particularly strong in Canada and Australia. One organization in each country was contacted. Dr. Rodney Syme, a member of the group and leader of Dying with Dignity in Melbourne, said promoting “dying with dignity” will be a good thing. Wanda Morris, the CEO of Dying with Dignity Canada, said “while we’d prefer you didn’t use dying with dignity as a synonym for suicide, I don’t see it causing us major problems if you decide to do so.”

To test the relative acceptance of these terms in a broader context, the members conducted surveys of the general populace. Two of these surveys involved all five terms; the larger survey included residents of the United Kingdom and Australia, as well as the U.S. The third focused on the term “dignicide” and was conducted in the U.S. only.

The results of the surveys can be summarized as follows:

1. Most respondents agreed that “suicide” was not an appropriate word for the type of dying described.
2. “Death/dying with dignity” was the preferred term among survey respondents.
3. In two surveys the term “dignicide” was not well liked. However, in the third survey, the one that focused on “dignicide,” respondents liked it better when given a rationale for using it. Some group members felt the construction of the survey biased the results in favor of the word.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Conclusions:

1. There appears to be no clear substitute for “suicide” to describe the hastening of death by those suffering great pain, those with progressive dementia, and those who simply have lived full lives but life has become a burden.
2. The general populace prefers “death/dying with dignity” over all alternatives. The group prefers simply “dying with dignity,” however context may call for “death with dignity.”
3. Although controversial, some members of the group believe “dignicide” deserves further consideration.

Recommendation:

Individuals and all right-to-die societies around the world should use the phrase “dying with dignity” or its variant “death with dignity” whenever possible. In other languages, the translated forms should likewise be used whenever possible. The rationale for this is that the surveys showed that 1) “suicide” is not appropriate, and 2) the phrase “dying with dignity” (including “death with dignity”) was clearly the best of the alternatives presented. Its widespread use will lead to the term being picked up by the media more and more often, and will hopefully be widely used by all instead of “suicide.”

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FULL REPORT

The initial effort was to get consensus on what our goal was. The leader (Bill Simmons) suggested this: “A word or phrase that would include accelerating death due to (1) great pain, (2) fear of extreme dementia, and (3) just being ready to die after a fruitful life.” There was no objection to this broad statement. The leader kept this in front of the group from time to time.

LISTS, AND CUTTING THEM DOWN

The initial list of 31 words and phrases was developed from recommendations of members, and from RTD (right-to-die) literature. Attachment 2 contains the list.

The group used weighted voting² to cut the list down to 17. All “cides” were deleted upon the recommendation of Kathryn Tucker, and a few phrases were added as a result of input from members. This reconstituted list of 19 is Attachment 3.

As a result of persistence from two members of the group, Lenn Bernstein and Hugh Wynne, “Dignicide” was added back. The leader gave these reasons for doing so: He had acted hastily in deleting the word upon Kathryn Tucker’s recommendation; he didn’t consult the group in making the deletion; one word is better than a phrase; it is novel and will generate discussion and with it recognition; no one has a corner on the word – no conflict; and lastly, in his view, it really works well in a conversation, largely because it is one word.

At this point the leader moved the group from voting on lists to discussing four distinct paths: 1) a phrase with “self-chosen” in it, 2) a phrase with “dignity” in it, 3) the phrase “choice in dying” and 4) “dignicide.”

The discussion on these four directions yielded no clear course of action. The conversation turned instead to getting input from a neutral focus group or two, or from a survey of some kind. It being the mid-winter holidays (northern hemisphere), the group took a long break.

Lenn took advantage of the break to see how “dignicide” would sit outside the right-to-die movement. At about the same time, the leader looked into how to do a focus group. Faye Girsh offered to help. Conducting a focus group looked like a lot of work, and maybe considerable cost.

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² Each member ranked terms, their 1st was given three votes, their 2nd two votes and their 3rd one.

THREE SURVEYS

The first survey conducted (mentioned as the third in the Summary) was done by Lenn Bernstein and his wife Jane on a website called Mechanical Turk. It captures young people looking to make some money. The survey focused on the word “dignicide.” There were 137 to 142 respondents to the key questions (not all respondents answered all questions). The lengthy introduction gave background about why the survey was being made. It also contained a comment by a man in a UK newspaper who promoted the “stigma-free” word, “dignicide.” The first question asked was about “suicide”, and 82% reacted “negatively” to it. As to the recommended word, 53% agreed strongly or very strongly with the recommendation. Another 25% were neutral. The remainder, 22%, opposed it. Another question asked at the end of the survey was have you changed your mind about the word, after thinking about it? Ten percent said yes. Note, 21% of the respondents said they were a member of a right-to-due organization; their answers were not broken out.

Since pursuing a focus group didn’t seem feasible, at least in the near term, Lenn and Jane Bernstein, Rob Jonquiere and Bill Simmons decided to try a more comprehensive survey on the website called Survey Monkey. A consultant reviewed the questions for bias. There was an introduction which explained the purpose of the survey: that it was for use for terminally-ill patients wanting to take their own life. It explained that the word “suicide” did not seem appropriate for this kind of dying. There were 304 respondents, 202 from the U.S., 50 from the U.K. and 52 from Australia.³ The first question asked was, “Do you believe suicide is the proper word to describe the hastened deaths described above?” 68% said no, 32% yes. Similar questions were asked for “self-deliverance,” “dying/death with dignity,” “rational suicide,” “humane self-chosen death,” and “dignicide.”

Here is a table showing the results. Responses of “strongly liked” and “liked” were combined, as were responses of “strongly disliked” and “disliked.” The table also breaks out the answers of respondents aged 55-69.

Word or Phrase	Like/Dislike All (304)	Like/Dislike U.S. (202)	Like/Dislike Australia(41)	Like/Dislike UK (23) ⁴	Like/Dislike 55-65 age (304)
Dying with Dignity	77/23%	75/25%	88/12%	83/17%	84/16%
Humane Self-Chosen Death	62/38	59/41	71/29	70/30	72/28
Self-Deliverance	47/53	48/52	59/41	39/61	49/51
Rational Suicide	37/64	33/67	44/56	39/61	38/62
Suicide (like: yes/no)	32/68	31/69	17/83	48/52	26/74%
Dignicide	27/73	26/74	29/71	22/78	32/68

³ The respondents were chosen by Survey Monkey, and were a general cross section in each country.

⁴ The responses for the U.K. are low because some people put down their country name, not United Kingdom; Survey Monkey’s analytics would not combine them. Likely a similar problem accounts for the loss of 9 in Australia (some were from New Zealand).

Thus “suicide” and “dignicide” are not liked, nor is “rational suicide.” “Self deliverance” is a toss-up. “Dying with dignity” and “humane, self-chosen death” are liked, with “dying with dignity” coming out considerably better of the two. Note that in the 55-65 age group 84% liked “dying with dignity.”

The bolded entries point out that in the U.K. “suicide” is more accepted than elsewhere, and that “self-deliverance” is liked in Australia but not in the U.K.

If you wish to look at this survey in detail, see links in Attachment 4 and/or contact Bill Simmons (Attachment 1).

Rob Jonquiere and Lenn and Jane Bernstein ran this same survey using e-mail lists for which Rob had access (100 respondents). The results were about the same; “dying with dignity” didn’t do quite as well (64/36), and “humane self-chosen death” was neutral. In this group 54% belonged to a right-to-die organization; in the larger survey only 9% were. The responses of the right-to-die people have not been broken out in either survey.

IS “DIGNICIDE” DEAD? (!!@??)

Not necessarily. While everyone in the Alt-Suicide Group thinks that “dying with dignity” should be promoted, a few of the group are considering continuing to work on “dignicide.” They are Lenn Bernstein, who first promoted the word, Dan Carrigan who opposed it, then saw that, with proper introduction and education, the word has merit, Hugh Wynne, who early on reserved the domain names dignicide.de & dignicide.com, and Bill Simmons. They think finding one word is important to use in conversations, and “dignicide” appears to be it. Are there others who would like to join in exploring “dignicide” further? If so, please contact one of the four persons mentioned.

Attachment 1 (Report, Alt Suicide Group)

PARTICIPANTS, AD HOC ALT SUICIDE GROUP

(Alphabetical, by Last Name)

Abraham, John, M.Div	Arizona	Thanatologist & Affiliate Coordinator of Final Exit Network AZ	jlavet@earthlink.net
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Carrigan, Dan	N. Carolina	Executive Vice President, Peaceful Self Deliverance America, Inc.	peacefulselfdeliveranceamerica@gmail.com
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Jonquiere, Rob, M.D.	Netherlands	WF Communications Director	robjonquiere@worldrtd.net
Parrella, Gilda	Illinois		gparrel@luc.edu
Pope, Thaddeus, J.D.	Minnesota	Law Professor	tpope01@hamline.edu
Preece, Jim (Deceased)	Canada (B.C.)	Farewell Foundation	
Preston, Tom, M.D.	Washington (state)	Author: <i>Doctor, Please Help Me Die</i>	tompresto@gmail.com
Robert Rivas, J.D.	Florida	General Counsel, Final Exit Network	RobRivas@aol.com
Shadle, Carolyn, Ph.D	California	Communication Writer, Trainer	cshadle@mac.com
Simmons, Bill, J.D.	California	www.finalexodus.org	vermilionsim@gmail.com
Syme, Rodney, M. D.	Australia	Author, <i>A Good Death</i>	rodsyme1@optusnet.com.au
Peter Vennewitz	Oregon		riversong41@gmail.com
Wynne, Hugh, Eur Ing	Scotland	Past Pres. WFRTDS, Treas. RTDE, Council Member, Friends at the End	hw@bcs.org

In addition, Jane Holmes Bernstein gave us the impetus and much help in pursuing the internet surveys.

Faye Girsh and Kathryn Tucker were kept informed through-out the process, and the latter participated from time to time.

Attachment 2
(Report, Alt Suicide Group)
INITIAL LIST OF WORDS AND PHRASES
(Alphabetical) (11-3-14)

Cathartic Death
Compassionate Termination (of life)
Death by Right
Death with Dignity
Deliberate Life Completion
Dignicide
Dignity in Dying
Exiting
Fulfilled Mortality
Hastened Death, Hastening of Death
Humane Self-Chosen Death
Life Ending Choice
Life's End
Managed Death
Natural Death
Peaceful Death
Rational Death, Rational Dying, Rational Life Termination
Self-Chosen Death
Self-Deliverance
Self-Imposed Death
Volitional Death, Voluntary Death
[The Leader recommended, for the reasons given, dropping these six, which was done]
Aid in Dying (we want a term that includes self-deliverance, as well PAD and other assistance.)
Consensual Murder ("Murder" is a word we want to stay away from)
Grey on Suicide (Has no meaning on its face)
Non Adscititious Death (Not inherent or essential; derived from something outside. (Most people don't know the word "adscititious")
Rational and Loving Suicide (Suicide is the word we are trying to avoid)
Rational Suicide (Suicide is the word we are trying to avoid)

Attachment 3
(Report, Alt Suicide Group)
SECOND LIST OF WORDS & PHRASES
 (Alphabetical) (11-16-14)

Choice in Dying
Compassionate Termination
Dying with Dignity Dignity in Death
Deliberate Life Completion
Hastened/Hastening Death
Humane Self-Chosen Death Dignified Humane Self-Chosen Death
Life Ending Choice
Managed Dying
Rational Choice in Dying
Rational Dying Rational Life Termination
Self Deliverance
Self-Chosen Death Self-Chosen Humane Death Peaceful Self-Chosen Death
Self-Chosen Life Termination
Volitional/Voluntary Dying

**Attachment 4
(Report, Alt Suicide Group)**

LINKS TO SURVEY OF 304 RESPONDENTS

U.S. U.K & Australia (304 respondents): <https://surveymonkey.com/results/SM-38YXZX37/>

U.S. Only (202 respondents): <https://surveymonkey.com/results/SM-VCPB2SZZ9/>

Australia Only (41 respondents): <https://surveymonkey.com/results/SM-HBWQPS37/>