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French Medical Professionals Admit Helping Patients Die, Endorse Euthanasia

A manifesto signed by 2134 French doctors and nurses entitled "We the Carers are Aware..." has been published in French newspapers. It is an admission of having ended life and states support for decriminalization of euthanasia. It states in part:

"Because, without any doubt, the illness defied our therapies, because, in spite of the treatment administered, the physical and psychological suffering made the life of the patient unbearable, because the patient wanted it all to end, we, the carers, have in full consciousness helped patients to die with dignity."

The manifesto points out the inadequacies of the present law: "...the recent examinations of doctors and nurses who helped their patients to die have proved that the law remains as repressive and unjust as ever, being out of step with medical reality." They demand "...the immediate cessation of cases brought against carers..." and "...an urgent revision of the law" based on "...the reforms already achieved in Switzerland, Belgium and the Netherlands."

The publication of this manifesto came days before the trials of Dr. Laurence Tramois and nurse Chantal Chanel, charged with administering a fatal dose of potassium to a woman suffering from terminal pancreatic cancer. It follows a court ruling in Italy that cleared Dr. Mario Riccio for removing the respirator of Piergiorgio Welby, a muscular dystrophy patient, who had described his life as torture. The manifesto called for charges to be dropped and urged a new law allowing active euthanasia.

Dr. Tramois was later convicted in the death of Paulette Druais but given a one-year suspended prison sentence. Nurse Chanel was acquitted. Druais's husband and son testified that they were grateful to Tramois and Chanel for their actions and insisted that Druais had asked to end her life.

(Newsletter, RtD Europe, and EuthaNEWSia)

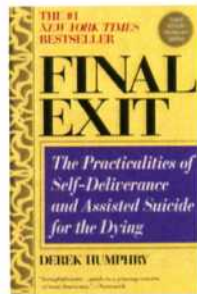


French nurse Chantal Chanel arrives at court in Perigueux, southern-western France, before the start of her trial for euthanasia. *REUTERS/Regis Duvignau*

Praise and Damnation for Final Exit

Derek Humphry's classic, the 'how-to' book received both a pat on the back and a slap in the face.

In April the editors and book critics of USA Today, selected Final Exit as one of the 25 most memorable books of the last quarter century.



The "how-to" paperback has been a consistent best seller since 1991 and has been translated into 12 languages (though only Spanish and Italian are now in print).

In contrast, Google Adwords, the search engine giant's advertising unit, rejected Final Exit advertising, giving their reason that it concerned "violence". Two appeals to higher management failed.



Study Finds Assisted Death Relatively Widespread in Europe

A study conducted by the National Institute for Demographic Studies concluded that between a quarter and a half of deaths in Europe followed a medical intervention which could have shortened life. Data were collected in Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland in 2001-2 on deaths of the very old. The deaths occurred due to the administration of pain-relieving treatments which can curtail life. Medical decisions with the specific intention of hastening death, such as stopping treatment or administration of lethal substances, affected only 2% of deaths in Italy but 21% of deaths in Switzerland, where such a practice is legal. In most cases patients and their families were involved in the decision-making – 68% in Italy and 95% in the Netherlands.

Living Wills Honored

It is legal in the UK for an incapacitated patient to be denied artificial nutrition and hydration -- now considered to be medical treatment in law - if doctors consider death to be in their best interest.

Living wills are to gain full legal status in October under the Government's controversial Mental Capacity Act, which critics say amounts to 'back door euthanasia'. Doctors who refuse to obey them will then leave themselves open to criminal prosecution.

Dr. Michael Irwin

In the past 18 months Dr. Michael Irwin, past president of the World Federation, has taken three terminally ill individuals to Zurich for assisted suicide in the apartment owned by Dignitas. Here he is at London's Gatwick Airport in November 2006 with Dave Richards, who had advanced Huntington's Disease. The photograph, provided by Dr. Irwin, shows Mr. Richards giving a poignant farewell wave. It appeared exclusively in the (London) Sunday Times.

Since then Dr. Irwin was seriously injured in an auto accident and is recuperating at home with the assistance of physical therapy and ministrations from his wife Angela. Members of FATE (Friends At The End) are being trained by Dr. Irwin to take over his job of escorting patients to the facility in Zurich.

Not one to allow moss to gather, Dr. Irwin has this to say about his newest enterprise, the Secular Medical Forum:

"Since last December, with several medical friends, I have been slowly developing the Secular Medical Forum: our main objective is to oppose religious influences in Medicine which affect the manner in which medical practice is performed in the UK.

Thus, we will campaign for a secular approach to current major health issues in the UK, ranging from physician-assisted suicide to stem-cell research, from the funding of hospital chaplains to religious circumcision, and from abortion to HIV/AIDS.

One of the main purposes of the Forum will be to challenge the Christian Medical Fellowship (which, established in 1949 in the UK, has a membership of 4,500) which successfully led the anti-choice organizations, at the British Medical Association annual conference last year, in overturning the previous BMA neutral position on physician-assisted suicide that had been adopted in 2005.

Last week, we launched our website:

www.secularmedicalforum.org.uk. There, you will find our policy statement on physician-assisted suicide (which was prepared with the help of several medical colleagues from the "old" VES)



Europe Succeeds in Having Living Wills on National Databases

Spain and the United Kingdom join Belgium in countries that have agreed to hold records of Living Wills from their citizens. They will set up systems over the next few years which will make these documents available on line. The German Right to Die Society (DGHS) holds members' records centrally and makes them available at all times on line. The Final Exit Network in the U.S. does the same for its members through the U.S. Living Will Registry.

(Newsletter, RtD Europe)



Naturally, my strong personal interest still remains the legislation of physician-assisted suicide in the UK. However, I believe it is most useful, through this Forum, to build up a coalition of physicians and nurses in the UK who are active in various "liberal" groups, supporting their specific campaigns, knowing that they are also likely to support mine. So far, the Forum has about 140 members: we have a target of 1000 by 2010."

The Search for the 'Peaceful Pill': Myth and Reality

Derek Humphry

For many years there has been an urban myth that there exists a tiny pill which, when swallowed, brings instant, painless death, thus wonderfully relieving the sufferer from further agony.

I have had requests for it scores of times from folk who genuinely believed such a fatal capsule was freely available. For instance, one note which reached me back in my Hemlock Society days read, quite simply: "Dear Hemlock, please send me one of your little red pills for me, and one for my friend Mary. I enclose \$2."

It has been called the 'Drion Pill' (after a Dutch judge of that name who pushed the idea in the 1990s), the 'LastWillPill' and – much more popularly recently — the 'Peaceful Pill'.

But this magic tablet does not exist, unless you exclude a cyanide capsule which only government secret services are able to obtain. (Even then it is an exceedingly painful — though fast — death that you would not want family to observe.) Puffer fish and some Australian snails are equally lethal, in seconds, but they do not of course come in pill form.

Over the years I have discussed the peaceful pill in my books, *Final Exit* (pages 110 and 139) and *The Good Euthanasia Guide* (page 21).

As such, a lethal pill does not yet exist, thus the term has developed into meaning any form of painless, quick, dignified death which the patient wishes to have. It is a metaphor, not an object.

The most deadly substance on the market is pentobarbital (often called Nembutal commercially) that is a barbiturate and powerful sleep-aid. It is usually the substance used in medical euthanasia where that action is legal. Worldwide, it is always on prescription, which few doctors will write because its connection with suicide is notorious. Even with pentobarbital's high toxicity, it is still necessary to take in nine grams of it to ensure certain death – hardly pill popping!



Sweden

Swedish patients will now be allowed to forgo life-sustaining treatment



In new guidelines, the Swedish Society of Medicine supports doctors withdrawing treatment which does not benefit the patient; they stress the patient's right to decide if life-sustaining treatment should be stopped. The change follows a much publicized case in which a Swedish man traveled to Dignitas to put an end to his life after unsuccessful requests to be allowed to die in Sweden. The man could have received help shutting his respirator after receiving general anesthesia.

The term has come back into attention with the publication of Nitschke/Stewart new book, *The Peaceful Pill Handbook*. They are careful to point out that this is a handbook outlining numerous methods of ending one's life, not a single way out.

Thus the hunt for the deadly elixir or pill continues. Many Dutch doctors have searched for this (unholy) grail, and I am told they've given up. Fast acting barbiturates are settled as the euthanasia drug of choice, best injected but also lethal when drunk from a glass.

Currently, the favored means of exit in America is the careful inhalation of helium gas, which both Nitschke's and my books outline with illustrations. A peaceful gas, not a pill. The beauty of this exit method is personal control and no doctors involved.

But what we really need is legal, medical, voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide in all countries interested in it, so that there is no need for these improvised, exotic pills and gases.

(The books mentioned above are obtainable from Amazon.com
Derek Humphry's BLOG: <http://www.assistedsuicide.org/blog/>)



Switzerland

Swiss High Court Opens Possibility of Assisted Dying for Mentally Ill



A ruling by Switzerland's highest court has opened the possibility that people with serious mental illnesses could be helped by doctors to take their own lives. The ruling states, "It must be recognized that an incurable, permanent, serious mental disorder can cause similar suffering as a physical (disorder), making life appear unbearable to the patient in the long term....if the death wish is based on an autonomous decision which takes all circumstances into account, then a mentally ill person can be prescribed sodium-pentobarbital and thereby assisted in suicide." Further they stated, "A distinction has to be made between a death wish which is an expression of a curable, psychiatric disorder and which requires treatment, and (a death wish) which is based on a person of sound judgment's own well-considered and permanent decision, which must be respected..."

The case was brought by a 53-year old man with serious bipolar affective disorder, who asked the tribunal to allow him to acquire a lethal dose of pentobarbital without a doctor's prescription.

