

Activist Targeted In Effort To Curb Internet Promotion Of Suicide

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Pacific Rim Bureau (CNSNews.com) - The Australian government is planning a clampdown on Internet websites that promote suicide, saying studies have shown that information on the subject may encourage suicidal behavior.

Justice and Customs Minister Chris Ellison said the aim is to prevent the use of the Internet to provide information "that encourages vulnerable individuals to take their own lives."

Anyone in Australia convicted under a proposed law of using the Internet to promote suicide could face fines of up to \$65,000.

The action is part of a broader government program also targeting those who use the Internet to disseminate or download child pornography.

A spokeswoman for Ellison's office on Monday cited two expert studies, published in 1997 and 1999, that had studied the role of the Internet in promoting suicidal behavior.

The first, published in the International Association for Suicide Prevention's journal, *Crisis*, looked at interactive suicide notes involving people who later committed suicide, illustrating the potential influence of the Internet on those who wanted to share their ideas and thoughts about suicide.

The other study, published in the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, reported on suicide attempts that showed the risk of having access via the Internet to information on suicide methods.

A simple browser search Monday for suicide methods turned up more than 300,000 results. Near the top of the list, along with satirical or academic sites, were ones offering detailed advice on ways to kill oneself. Some offer gory after-the-fact pictures.

Apart from websites, the Internet also offers newsgroups and chatrooms where any subject can be discussed and advice sought and be given. On one typical newsgroup, web users share information on everything from where to get hold of potentially lethal substances, to how to avoid botching the suicide attempt.

Ellison's spokeswoman said the Australian government's plan also aimed at preventing the distribution of material promoting suicide by email. One of the most controversial figures in the worldwide movement to legalize assisted suicide is an Australian euthanasia advocate and doctor Philip Nitschke. He is likely a key target of the planned government action.

Nitschke Monday slammed the move, saying he uses the Internet to communicate with elderly, ill people who may want to take their own lives.

Not only had the government rescinded "good laws" that would help people in that situation, it was now wanting to make it "impossible for them to even get information that they can use to end their suffering," he said.

Nitschke was referring to a short-lived law legalizing assisted suicide for terminally-ill patients in Australia's Northern Territory in the mid-1990s, under which he helped four people to die using a contraption linking a computer to a needle and the lethal barbiturate, Nembutal.

Since the law's repeal in 1998, Nitschke has been agitating for the legalization of euthanasia in Australia. He regularly holds clinics at which information on suicide is discussed, while taking pains not to break the law.

'Harassment'

Last year he was associated with the much-publicized suicide of a woman who was found after her death to be free of the bowel cancer she - and Nitschke - said had been making her life unbearable. Other patients have also killed themselves, thanking him in their suicide notes. Since then, Nitschke has accused the government of harassing him. The authorities have raided his offices, confiscated material, and tried to undercut his attempts to promote various suicide devices.

Canberra amended customs regulations to prohibit the export of devices that could be used to commit suicide or to assist suicide, as well as documents encouraging suicide.

Last January, customs officers in Sydney confiscated the prototype of his latest invention - a machine designed to help people to gas themselves to death using carbon monoxide - as Nitschke was about to fly to California to unveil the device at a Hemlock Society conference.

Again last week, Nitschke was stopped by customs officials in Melbourne as he prepared to fly to New Zealand for a series of promotional meetings.

This time they did not find the parts for the death machine in his baggage - he said afterwards he had sent the component separately as a precaution.

Meanwhile, Nitschke's meetings in New Zealand have drawn small audiences, despite considerable pre-publicity and the fact the visit coincides with a parliamentary debate on a "death with dignity" bill, and the trial of a euthanasia proponent charged with trying to kill her terminally-ill mother.

A public meeting in Auckland (pop. 1.1 million) drew fewer than 40 people.

David Fisk, spokesman for the New Zealand pro-life group Family Life International noted that Nitschke believes all people -- regardless of age or health -- should have the right to take their own life, and that it should be legal to provide people with the required knowledge to do so.

"Given that he has played a big part in the deaths of so many in Australia where euthanasia is illegal, we would have to wonder what the death toll will be if it became legal in New Zealand," he said.

A private member's bill, to be debated by lawmakers in Wellington this week, seeks to legalize euthanasia for an adult who has obtained two independent medical opinions, undergone professional counseling and gone through a mandatory waiting period.