

Dignitas: Swiss suicide helpers



Assisted suicide is illegal in many countries

"Live with dignity, die with dignity" is the slogan of the Swiss charity, Dignitas.

The group has caught the headlines as people with chronic diseases from around the world travel to Switzerland to ask for its help in committing suicide.

Founded in 1998, Dignitas has now helped 146 people die - more than two-thirds of them foreigners.

"What we are doing is a friendly act... we have never had a problem with police," said director Ludwig Minelli.

Legal basis

The Swiss law on suicide states:

"Whoever lures someone into suicide or provides assistance to commit suicide out of a self-interested motivation will, on completion of the suicide, be punished with up to five years' imprisonment".

Dignitas interprets this to mean that anyone who assists suicide altruistically cannot be punished.

Its specialist staff all work as volunteers to ensure there can be no conflict of interest.

They engage in detailed discussion about whether the patient's determination to die falls within the legal boundaries, and whether it is indeed the declared will of the patient.



Reg Crew from the UK is among those to use Dignitas' services



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Dignitas also provides a text for patients, which states their wish for assisted suicide in terms which cannot be misconstrued and which allows them to carry out their wishes even in the face of opposition, if necessary.

Peaceful and painless

Once the decision has been made, the patient travels to Zurich where he or she is taken to a Dignitas flat to administer the dose of barbiturates which will end his or her life.

"The patient always makes the last act - swallowing the drug or opening a valve of a drip himself," said Mr Minelli.

The drug is supposed to induce a deep sleep within minutes of being taken, which will lead to a peaceful and painless death, Dignitas says.

"I bring [the drink] to the patient and once again ask, 'Is this your last day because this will be your last drink. Afterwards it's over, you will sleep two to five minutes and afterwards you will die'," said nurse Erica Lully who prepares the doses.

“This will be your last drink - afterwards it's over, you will sleep two to five minutes and afterwards you will die

Erica Lully, Dignitas nurse

Opposition

Despite the apparent demand for Dignitas' services, the group's activities have stirred up some opposition within Switzerland.

Beatrice Wertli, from the Swiss Christian democrats, has voiced concerns about the legal basis of an organised group promoting and carrying out assisted suicide.

"We feel the organisations are too pushy in helping people to commit suicide," she said.

“We do not want Switzerland to be a destination for tourism for suicide

Beatrice Wertli, Swiss Christian Democrats

And she is worried about the reputation it is giving her country.

"We do not want Switzerland to be a destination for tourism for suicide," she said.