

Euthanasia in Switzerland – Today's situation

Consultation: Eurochaplains, Tartu

Passive and indirect active euthanasia (Analgesia: a life shortening is expected) are allowed in Switzerland. As an option, these are checked on default with the human, who is in the last phase of its life and applied if it seems indicated. Of course, team conversations with the patient and its relatives take place; health care directives (the living will), which are not widespread, are consulted. The final decision lies with the own doctor.

However, prohibited is active euthanasia, to kill on demand. Advances to legalise the active euthanasia, similar to the Netherlands and Belgium, were rejected by the parliament a few years ago.

Worldwide, Switzerland is known as the only country that does not punish the aid to suicide, as long as it does not happen out of selfish reasons. The difference to active euthanasia is that the person, who wants to die, commits the act and takes the lethal medication by its own; it may not be given by a third person. The legal consideration which has lead to this law is that suicide is not prohibited, therefore any aid to this legal act can not be punishable either. This law is basically supported by 80% of the population.

Organisations that offer such a systematical aid to suicide exist since 20 years in Switzerland. The older one, EXIT, turns mainly to persons that live in Switzerland. Exit has taken care of 287 cases in 2007. In 179 cases they effectively helped with the suicide. Dignitas, the other organisation, exists since 10 years and turns much more actively to persons abroad. They helped persons in 136 cases to suicide in 2005 (more actual data can not be found on their website, but we believe that these are much higher nowadays). Those who make use of the services of Dignitas, must count with expenses of CHF 10'000.-¹. This has lead to a so called "death tourism", especially from Germany, which is not accepted by the media and the population.

There is widely the desire that the activities of the "dying-aid-organisations" are ruled and controlled by the confederation. Until the end of 2007 the responsible swiss minister has resisted to doing this. Then, he was deselected for other reasons, and it is now possible, that his successor is ready to accept this matter and stand for it. Requested is mainly a serious clarification of the wish to die on suicide, the education of the suicide assistants as well as the financial transparency of the organisation.

In the meantime, the attorney general of the canton of Zurich, which is especially affected, tries to enforce local regulations (for example: more than one visit at the doctor who signs for the lethal injection). Active resistance comes also from the population: The flat of Dignitas, where the suicides took place, was cancelled. It was almost impossible for Dignitas to find an appropriate compensation. Consequently, it came to that - by the media internationally noted - suicide on a parking ground last november.

The triggered outrage in the public lead to the desire for a better promotion of alternatives to suicide. Organisations that prevent suicide, especially Palliative Care, which is not yet as well developed in Switzerland as for example in Great Britain, have attracted attention by this and hope for more promotion by the confederation and by private persons or organisations. Under these conditions a huge consensus-meeting is planned for December 2008 with the goal to establish a "swiss end of life care"- coalition. The swiss confederation president and health minister Pascal Couchepin has already committed to participate as well as other main responsables from politics, administration, professional and health organisations, church, etc. We hope that this allows further positive developments.

¹ „Dignitas in Switzerland...“, Referat L.A. Minelli, London, Dezember 2007 (auf www.dignitas.ch)