



Zurich-Forch, 21 August 2017

A note from DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity
about the organisation's activities

DIGNITAS: Freedom of choice and self-determination in life and at life's end

In many countries, assisted suicide is still prohibited – although a majority of the population supports it. DIGNITAS enables its members' self-determination and freedom of choice through comprehensive advisory work. Through its international legal work, it also contributes to opening up the public debate on end-of-life issues and having them discussed on the political and legislative level.

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity is a non-profit member society. Through its activities it gives people a choice, especially those who – for legal reasons – do not (yet) have one in their own country: the possibility to decide on time and manner of their own end of life. People who become members at DIGNITAS do not usually do so because they want to die, but because they want to have the safety of a choice. Only 3% of all DIGNITAS members make use of an accompanied suicide.

The number of members of DIGNITAS has grown steadily in recent years. As of mid-2017, DIGNITAS counts more than 8,400 members. The DIGNITAS team currently comprises 22 part-time employees. All are employed with regular work contracts, with the corresponding rights, social insurance and obligations.

Advisory work and suicide attempt prevention

Much is being written about DIGNITAS – but few people know that the organisation's activities go far beyond accompanied suicide. A large part of DIGNITAS's work is counselling of persons – mostly from abroad – who get in touch with DIGNITAS in writing or by telephone for a variety of reasons. Every day, DIGNITAS receives dozens of e-mails, letters and calls. About one third of the daily telephone advisory work is provided to non-members. This counselling focuses on showing people paths to improve their quality of life. Accompanied suicide is only one topic among others. It is, so to speak, an "emergency exit" for those who have exhausted other options (for example palliative care measures, further therapies, etc.) or who do not wish to make use of them anymore. Suicide attempt prevention is the core of DIGNITAS's comprehensive advisory work. Only by taking a person seriously in his or her desire to end their suffering and life for whatever reason, only by openly exploring all options and offering a real emergency exit and thus enabling an open-outcome conversation, it is possible to prevent a rise of pressure due to hopelessness and despair which would otherwise lead people to attempt a high-risk lonely suicide. Only such honest and comprehensive advisory work has a suicide attempt preventive effect.

Quality Management

DIGNITAS attaches great importance to quality in all of its processes. The auditing firm BDO AG, which is also the organisation's official controlling body, carried out a review of the 2016 annual financial statements in the second quarter of 2017 with a positive result. The review complements the activities of an independent tax lawyer who, in cooperation with the tax authorities, monitors DIGNITAS's bookkeeping.

At the beginning of 2017, the 7th Report on Quality Control of DIGNITAS Services in Relation to Accompanied Suicide was published. Just like the previous reports, it ensures transparency and contains both praise and criticism.

DIGNITAS works closely with the authorities, which, in accordance with Swiss law, investigate every accompanied suicide carried out. For every accompanied suicide, they receive an extensive file. Tight investigation procedures and constructive communication ensure safety and transparency.

Regular further education for employees as well as an independent Ombudsman have been part of quality assurance at DIGNITAS for several years. The organisation is also assisted by external, independent experts in medicine, law and IT.

Legal work

In Western Europe and other modern states, a large part of the population supports self-determination in life and at life's end, whether it is assisted suicide or active euthanasia (which is forbidden in Switzerland). However, politics often shows little or no interest in dealing with the issue. It has repeatedly become clear that change can be brought about mainly through legal action: since its establishment almost 20 years ago, DIGNITAS has (co-)initiated, led and funded numerous court cases. In 2016, some 250,000 Swiss Francs of the association's income was used for legal further development through national and international court cases with regard to self-determination in life and at life's end. The aim is to enforce, on an international level, the freedom of every individual to decide on time and manner of his or her own end of life, as confirmed in principle by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court in 2006 and by the European Court of Human Rights in 2011. The legal-political work of DIGNITAS (court decisions, reports, submissions, comments, etc.) is documented at www.dignitas.ch.

Public Relations Work

DIGNITAS renounces the use of financial means to proactively advertise for its services. Communication activities serve primarily to inform and educate interested parties, both online and in direct dialogue through discussions and speeches, in Switzerland and abroad. These are aimed mainly at schools for health and social care as well as experts in medicine and law. In addition, DIGNITAS sometimes speaks at a wider public, as, for example, in 2016 at the highly acclaimed exhibition "death – is it your right to choose?" at the Bristol Museum & Art Gallery.

Accompanied suicide

As long as not all people have real freedom of choice in situations of suffering, and as long as individuals from abroad have to travel all the way to Switzerland in order to be able to end their suffering and life in a self-determined and safe manner in the presence of their loved ones, the work of DIGNITAS is indispensable. Since 2012, the number of accompanied suicides at DIGNITAS has

been stable at just over 200 persons per year. With 102 accompanied suicides in the first half-year of 2017, there is no significant change in this.

Often, it is sufficient for a suffering individual to know that the option of an accompanied suicide is open to them. Only very few persons who approach DIGNITAS with a precise wish to end their lives ultimately make use of this option. In recent years, fewer than 50% of all DIGNITAS members whose request for an accompanied suicide was complete and then assessed by a Swiss physician independent of DIGNITAS, actually decided to make use of the accompanied suicide.

Preparing and carrying out accompanied suicide is very labour-intensive and complex, especially with individuals from abroad. The costs associated with it cannot always be fully borne by the members themselves. As a charitable non-profit member society, DIGNITAS is open to all persons, irrespective of their financial situation. If need be, based on its statutes, DIGNITAS reduces or even completely waives fees on reasoned request. In 2016, DIGNITAS granted CHF 70,000 in reduction of fees.

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BACKGROUND:

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity was founded in May 1998 with the aim to make the proven Swiss model of freedom of choice, self-determination and personal responsibility in life and at life's end also accessible for individuals abroad.

DIGNITAS's advisory concept – combining palliative care, suicide attempt prevention, advance directives/decisions and assisted dying – offers a basis for good decision-making to shape life until the end.

The non-profit member society has over 8,400 members in 84 countries around the world.

Through litigation, DIGNITAS obtained a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in 2011, acknowledging the right/freedom of a competent individual to decide on time and manner of his or her own end in life, and confirming this to be protected by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

DIGNITAS has been engaged in many more lawsuits in Europe and Canada, and has provided in-depth submissions and received visits by expert and parliamentary committees from Great Britain, Australia, Canada, etc. when laws were discussed and planned for the protection of a patient's autonomy and human dignity.

The founder of the charitable DIGNITAS organisation is Ludwig A. Minelli, an attorney-at-law specialising in human rights. The team of DIGNITAS consists of board members, over twenty part-time employees and it is supported by several external experts in the fields of medicine and law.