



OUR AGEING POPULATION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In 1900, the average life expectancy at birth for the world as a whole was only around 30 years, and in the Western world just under 50. The figures now, according to an *Economist* report last year, are 67 and 78 respectively, and still rising.

SOARS is mainly concerned about those who are 85 and older. Today, in the UK, there are 1.3 million individuals in this age group: by 2020, it is believed there will be at least two million: and, by 2035, it is estimated that there will be 3.2 million, accounting for five per cent of the population.

A Newcastle University “85 plus” study, published last December, stated that nine in ten of these elderly people would be expected to have at least three health problems, such as heart disease, osteoarthritis and impaired vision, which would require treatment. Ageing populations put increasing burdens on a nation’s health and social services. In an ideal world, the rising financial costs involved should not be an issue, but, unfortunately, this world is very far from ideal.

RECENT DUTCH DEVELOPMENTS

The Dutch had decriminalized voluntary euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide for terminally-ill and severely disabled individuals, who were suffering unbearably, in the early 1980s - and it had legalized these procedures in 2002.

But, consideration of Old Age Rational Suicide, in The Netherlands, has been steadily growing over the past twenty years, ever since Professor Huib Drion, a former Vice President of the Dutch Supreme Court, wrote “Without much doubt, I have the feeling that many elderly people would be greatly relieved knowing that there is a means to end life respectably at the moment suitable to them, based on what they reasonably can expect from that point on” in 1991.

More recently, in February 2010, a citizens’ initiative, known as “One’s Own Free Will” (Uit Vrije Wil) was started, seeking the legal possibility for elderly Dutch nationals to be able to receive professional help for an assisted suicide, if this is their competent decision. By April, over 120,000 signatures (in a country of 16 million) had been collected in favour of introducing such legislation – with former parliamentarians, and many legal scholars and doctors giving their support. The number of signatures is more than sufficient to force a debate in the Dutch parliament later this year: then, however, if approved, there will have to be a lengthy process of committee work and consensus-building that could take many years.

The Dutch right-to-die society, NVVE (the Dutch Association for a Voluntary End of Life), with other national organizations, has formally started the campaign - called “Completed Life” - in support of this citizens’ initiative.

SOARS will be following, with great interest, what is now happening in The Netherlands.



JUNE LIVING WILL CAMPAIGN - in Brighton and Hove

SOARS wants to stress that all competent adults should have an Advance Decision (still widely known as a Living Will). This is especially important for elderly individuals, when it is essential to write this document keeping in mind any specific health problems which are already present, and thinking about particular complications that might occur.

During June, in Brighton and Hove, in south England, there will be a month-long SOARS campaign - distributing leaflets, full-page advertisements in *The Argus* (the city's daily newspaper), and a 24-hour telephone hotline in operation to handle any questions - to encourage the greater acceptance and use of Advance Decisions.

The term "Living Will" is a popular expression for this document because it is "living" as it takes effect before death, and it is a "will" because it states someone's wishes.

It is everybody's right to be able to accept or refuse medical treatment. Living Wills allow individuals to state the type and extent of medical care that they would or would not want to receive if, in the future, they are unable to express their wishes at that time (for example, if they should develop a serious dementia or suffer an extensive stroke).

Advance Decisions are increasingly accepted, and are now legally binding, in England, Scotland and Wales (but, unfortunately, not yet in Northern Ireland). They can be of considerable benefit to someone's family, friends, and personal doctor because they are documentary evidence of an individual's wishes.

Essentially, an Advance Decision, written when someone is mentally competent, which refuses life-prolonging treatment (such as tube-feeding or being kept on a life-support machine) when that individual later becomes mentally incompetent, can technically be considered as a request for a Rational Suicide.

A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE OF OARS

In July 2009, Sir Edward Downes, a former conductor of the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, who, at 85, was suffering from blindness and increasing deafness, chose to have a Dignitas doctor-assisted suicide with his wife, who had terminal cancer, in Zurich. They had been married for fifty-four years. Their two middle-aged children travelled with them to Switzerland, and, fully supporting their parents, were present with them at the end.

INTERNATIONAL AWARENESS OF SOARS

Today, of course, a website produced in one country can be seen around the world. When the SOARS website (www.soars.org.uk) was created last month, this event was announced by two international right-to-die news services (ERGO and EuthaNEWSia). And, it was gratifying that the development of SOARS was reported in various national right-to-die publications, ranging from that published by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of New Zealand to that from Friends At The End (based in Scotland).

THE FIRST ANNUAL SOARS LECTURE

This will be given by the distinguished philosopher and educator, Lady Mary Warnock, on Saturday afternoon, September 25th, in Brighton.

Lady Warnock has been described as "Britain's chief moral referee for the past thirty years". The title of her talk will be "Easeful Death for the Very Elderly".

Admission is free, but a ticket must be obtained in advance, in early September, by sending an e-mail to Michael Irwin, at mail@soars.org.uk, giving your name and address.

RECENT USEFUL QUOTES

Referring to the “curse of longevity... the authors challenge our culture’s determination to prevent death and prolong life at all costs. They argue strongly for an end to the silence on this subject, and challenge the belief that living longer is automatically valuable when that life has lost all value for the person concerned” – From a review of “The Welcome Visitor” by John Humphrys and Sarah Jarvis, which appeared in the Winter 2009 issue of *Dignity in Dying’s Campaign* newsletter.

“Contemporary societal attitudes have elevated patient autonomy to the point where it outweighs almost every other ethical principle. Collectively, we no longer believe that suicide is a sin... It would be odd to abandon our commitment to patients’ autonomy and dignity only when death approaches” – Dr. David Jewell, Editor, *British Journal of General Practice*, November 2009.

“In my 30 years as an Emergency Room physician, I have watched many people die. I’ve learned from them that the modern American death is often a chronic illness, spanning some five to 10 years, in which a person slowly loses their mobility, their independence, their ability to perform basic activities of daily living, their intellect, and all ability to enjoy life. At some point in this decline, many of us would choose to say, ‘enough suffering, just let me die’” – Dr. Jeanne Fitzpatrick, writing in *The Huffington Post*, February 9, 2010.

“To what extent should we respect the desire of a fellow human being to end his or her life earlier than is necessary?... Others claim that every suicide represents a failure of society to provide the conditions that would make life bearable... Accepting that a person has a right to die, and may even be right to die, is not just a moral imperative: it’s essential if we are to recognise fully the extent to which we are each and every one of us responsible for our very existence” – Julian Baggini, Editor of *The Philosophers’ Magazine*, writing in *The Independent*, February 27, 2010 (his article was entitled “Suicide can be a Rational Choice”).

OURS IS A VERY LONG-TERM CAMPAIGN

The longest journey begins with the first step. The twelve founding members of SOARS, last December, definitely realized that in starting a discussion on the possibility of changing British law – to allow very elderly, competent individuals, suffering unbearably from various health problems, to receive a doctor-assisted suicide, if this is their persistent choice – it will be many decades before Parliament is likely to agree. But, they strongly believe that, as elsewhere in Europe, such a debate should begin, focusing on what many might personally want for themselves when they become “very elderly”.

The start of this long campaign really began with the ICM Direct telephone poll that SOARS had commissioned in February, in which 1,000 Brighton and Hove residents were contacted. It was a wonderful surprise to discover that there was a 67% support for the proposed change in British law, with only 18% in disagreement, and the remaining 15% being uncertain. An extensive report on this poll appeared in *The Sunday Telegraph* on February 21st, and in *The Argus* on the following day.

The “Final Word” goes to a supporter of SOARS who wrote last month, “How many of the very elderly in this country are riding the ‘train bound for nowhere’ in hopelessness, pain and misery, and who would like to disembark before the end of the line?”

