



WIDENING THE PRESENT DEBATE

First of all, in January, a collection of essays by thirty contributors (including Anthony Grayling, Steve Jones, Will Self, Peter Tatchell, Mary Warnock, and Chris Woodhead) was published as “I’ll See Myself Out, Thank You”. Co-edited by Colin Brewer, a retired psychiatrist, and Michael Irwin, the SOARS Coordinator, this not-for-profit book, produced by Skyscraper Publications, presents reasoned arguments for all competent adults, who are suffering unbearably from irreversible illnesses, being allowed to receive medical help to die. Among the essays, Michael has one on “Rational Old Age Suicide”, and another on accompanying several determined, severely-ill individuals to Switzerland.

Extensive reviews of this book have appeared in the February issue of Literary Review, The Times (on February 5th), Pulse (February 25th), the British Medical Journal (April 9th), and in the May issue of The Oldie; and references to it have been made in The Mail on Sunday, The Sunday Times (twice), The Independent, The Daily Telegraph and the Spectator.

And, a comment from Phil Cheadle, the SOARS Associate Coordinator, “Having read the book I was so impressed that I bought some additional copies to give away. I stuck an insert page in the front to ask the recipients to pass the book on to others, become a SOARS supporter, and buy some additional copies to circulate in the same way. I suggest that other SOARS supporters do likewise. That would be a small, but effective way to gain increased public support for the ideas underlying SOARS, which is what we are about after all”.

Then, in March, Andrew Copson, the Chief Executive of the British Humanist Association, stated that “The Falconer Bill doesn’t go far enough - it wouldn’t have helped Jean Davies, Debbie Purdy, Tony Nicklinson, or any number of brave, incurably sick people who desperately wanted a compassionate option”

This statement reminds us of the policy which the Voluntary Euthanasia Society adopted for several decades (“The VES aims to make it legal for a competent adult, who is suffering unbearably from an incurable illness, to receive medical help to die at their own considered and persistent request”) before it was reorganized as Dignity in Dying in 2005, with the much more limited objective of only legalizing doctor-assisted suicide for the “terminally ill”. And, the present BHA position is very close to that of SOARS - namely, that elderly, competent individuals who are suffering unbearably should be legally allowed to receive a doctor’s assistance to die.

Last year, the BHA supported Paul Lamb, who is paralysed from the neck down, when he appeared, along with the widow of Tony Nicklinson, before the Supreme Court in London - his case resulted in this Court stressing that Parliament had to debate again the possibility of a “right-to-die”

law. The BHA is now willing to support other individuals who, like Paul Lamb, want to publicly fight for the legal right for choice over end-of-life care.

If you know of anyone who might like to follow in Paul’s footsteps, please contact Michael Irwin (michael@soars.org.uk).



LORD FALCONER'S "ASSISTED DYING" BILL

During the past few months, this Bill has been discussed in detail "in Committee" in the House of Lords. One of the amendments, accepted by Lord Falconer, was the necessity for a judge from the Family Division of the High Court to interview the terminally-ill individual wishing to die (in addition to the two doctors who would also be involved) - this judicial safeguard was considered important in order to prevent vulnerable people being pressured to end their lives.

Although this additional safeguard is not required in any other legislation where a "right-to-die" is presently legal, it was welcomed by SOARS which, ever since its establishment in 2009, has stated that "All elderly persons requesting a doctor-assisted suicide must be interviewed privately by an official, independent legal witness, experienced in family matters, to ensure that they are acting on their own free will, and not being pressured by relatives or friends".

Like many others in the UK, SOARS supporters regard the draft Falconer Bill (which will be reintroduced to a new Parliament, after the General Election) as only being a "first step" before the UK eventually follows the example of other Western European countries like Belgium, Luxembourg, The Netherlands and Switzerland, where any competent adult, who is suffering unbearably, can receive a doctor's assistance to die.

MEETING WITH LIFECIRCLE

In addition to Dignitas in Zurich, there are two other organizations in Switzerland willing to provide doctor-assisted suicides to non-Swiss nationals - Lifecircle (also known as Eternal Spirit) in Basle, and EX International in Bern (Nan Maitland, one of the founding members of SOARS, died with the assistance of EX International in March 2011). Both are very much smaller than Dignitas, and so help far fewer suffering individuals.

On February 1st, the Sunday Times reported on an elderly Scottish couple (one, aged 86, was going blind and had early dementia; the other, aged 89, was going deaf and had extensive arthritis) who had gone to Lifecircle last November to die together. FATE had been much involved in assisting them to get to Basle. In the Sunday Times report, Michael Irwin was quoted - "This is a wonderful example of two competent, elderly individuals who were suffering severely and irreversibly in their eighties deciding that they wanted to have control on when they wished to end their long lives". This was the first reference to Lifecircle in the British media.

On March 15th, Michael met with Dr. Erika Preisig, the President of Lifecircle, when she was in London (during this visit, she also examined a SOARS supporter who is expected to travel to Basle in May). During this extensive meeting, Dr. Preisig noted that "More than half of those that Lifecircle assists with an accompanied suicide are not terminally ill".

FATE-SOARS LONDON MEETING - APRIL 10TH.

Returning to Conway Hall (in Red Lion Square, WC1), a historical London landmark famous for considering "liberal causes", this well-attended meeting was chaired by Libby Wilson, who was appointed a Patron of SOARS last year. The speaker was Dr. Colin Brewer whose subject was "Medically-Assisted Rational Suicide in Dementia - Better lose your life before you lose your mind?". He has been much involved in "right-to-die" issues for more than three decades; and, in recent years, he has worked closely with FATE and SOARS, especially in assessing the mental competence of several seriously-ill individuals who later travelled to Switzerland to end their lives there.

The main points made by Dr. Brewer were - Today, many people, especially as they grow older, are generally more worried about getting dementia than cancer (over the age of 80, about 25% develop dementia; and, for about half of these individuals, the time from onset to death will be at least seven years) ...Early in this disease, many can adapt to some extent - then, they unfortunately lose insight into their condition. But, during this initial period, many will naturally feel that “There is nothing left when you lose your mind”...Our personality is mainly a function of our brain - beyond a certain point, the destruction of our brain means that we cease to be the person that we used to be and become someone else - it is not unreasonable to take action to avoid that very unwelcome outcome ...Current drugs can slow the progress of Alzheimer’s dementia (the main form of “dementia” - others being, for example, vascular dementia) a little but cannot prevent steady decline.

Dr. Brewer stressed that, in a 2007 UK survey, if suffering from dementia, 75% wanted to be allowed to die passively, and almost 60% agreed with doctor-assisted suicide ...However, in spite of a long and successful history of voluntary euthanasia in the Netherlands, both health care proxies and doctors there shy away from implementing an Advance Decision when someone has dementia who is no longer mentally competent ...At present, for British sufferers, the only solution is to opt for a medically-assisted rational suicide (MARS) in Switzerland while mental competence still exists (and, he described several case histories of those he has assisted in this situation).

Finally, while stressing the importance of making a detailed Advance Decision and keeping this up to date, Dr. Brewer concluded - “There is no compulsion in the matter but, for most people, it is very much better to lose your life than to lose your brain and stay alive” - and the audience agreed with him.

At this London meeting, Phil Cheatle reported on the present SOARS “Completed Life” project; and, Helen Wood (the FATE Convener) updated the audience on the progress of the Assisted Suicide (Scotland) Bill which is presently being discussed in the Edinburgh Parliament.

OTHER PUBLIC AND MEDIA ACTIVITIES

Libby Wilson spoke in a Channel Four TV programme on November 26th, about campaigning for “assisted dying”. On December 19th, Michael Irwin participated in an extensive TV debate in Paris on the euthanasia laws presently existing in Europe, with special reference to the importance of assisting those in “old age”. A letter in the Daily Telegraph on December 30th, from Michael, referred to the need to expand the draft Falconer Bill to follow the example of the Benelux countries and Switzerland, “especially as many disabled individuals and elderly people can suffer much longer and more severely than those expected to die within six months”. In the January issue of The Oldie, there was an article by Colin Brewer on assessing the mental capacity of individuals seeking a doctor-assisted suicide in Switzerland. On January 2nd, Janice Williams and Celia Kitzinger, two SOARS supporters, were interviewed on the Radio Four “PM Programme” about the importance of advance decisions. On January 16th, Michael Irwin was interviewed on BBC West Midlands about the debate in the House of Lords on the Falconer Bill. In the February issue of The Oldie, Gill Pharaoh, a SOARS supporter, described accompanying a man, suffering from motor neurone disease, to Dignitas last year. And, on March 30th, Michael spoke about old age rational suicide to the Nottingham Secular Society.

SOARS ACTIVITIES

In the past six months, there have been regular meetings of the Die-alogue Groups in South London, in Bristol, and in Brighton and Hove.

In January and February, all SOARS supporters were asked to give their comments on an extensive draft statement which had been prepared by Phil Cheatle on “When is a Life Complete?”. It is very important

to involve our supporters much more in the activities of SOARS, and this developing discussion on a “Completed Life” is one way of doing this. The response from our supporters was excellent: while many just expressed general agreement with the initial text, forty-five wrote detailed comments and suggestions which will be most helpful in producing a revised statement. It is hoped that all of us will use the expression “Completed Life” more and more with our families, friends and colleagues so that as many as possible will start thinking about this concept, especially as it may be much easier to discuss this possibility rather than talking about what is the obvious next step, a rational suicide. And, in April, SOARS was requested by Democrats 66, a political party in the Netherlands, to provide a report about this internal exercise for its annual conference which, among other subjects, was considering “Euthanasia after a Completed Life”.

The SOARS website (www.soars.org.uk) needs to be revised. So, please do look at this again, and then do not hesitate to give us your comments. Also, the Wikipedia article about SOARS has been extensively rewritten.

SIXTH ANNUAL SOARS LECTURE AND THE SOARS ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Both of these events will be held on Friday afternoon, October 23rd, at the Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1 (the nearest tube station is Holborn). The Annual SOARS Lecture, starting at 2.30pm, will be given by Phil Cheatle, and will be on “When is a Life Complete? What next?”. The AGM will follow about 4.15pm.

One of the very important functions of our AGM is to elect a new Executive Council. It is likely that two members on the present Council will be retiring in October, and the others have to stand for re-election. Anyone wishing to be considered for election to the 2015-16 SOARS Executive Council should contact Michael Irwin (michael@soars.org.uk, or **01483 273 700**) before the end of August.

USEFUL QUOTES

“Too many old people in the developed world end their lives in hospital, hooked up to machines and surrounded by strangers. That needs to change” **The Economist, October 4, 2014.**

“We are facing a time bomb. By 2030, England will have double the number of over 85s” **Norman Lamb, Care Minister, November 29, 2014.**

“The number of people over the age of 90 in the UK has grown by a quarter in just four years and now stands at just under 530,000, almost 1 per cent of the entire population” **The Daily Telegraph, November 29, 2014.**

“One problem is that the laws on the Right to Die are made by people who haven’t reached old age. They don’t know, yet, that as we get older, many of us find that not only do we fear death less than when we were younger, but that we might even welcome it” **Virginia Ironside, quoted in The Independent, January 30, 2015.**

“I don’t think that it’s kind to keep all these older people going when they’re barely alive and would rather not be ... I have no intention of moving in with either of my daughters and ruining their lives, so I would do what needs to be done” **Joanna Trollope, February 28, 2015.**

“Life is indeed a gift...a gift may be graciously returned with thanks” **Rob Jonquiere, Communications Director of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies, March 8, 2015.**

“It is our moral duty to allow people to choose to die with dignity, rather than continue to live a life fraught with pointless misery” **Pavan Dhaliwal, BHA Director of Public Affairs and Campaigns, March 12, 2015.**