



## NAN MAITLAND ENDS HER LIFE IN SWITZERLAND

Nan Maitland was one of the founding members of SOARS (in December 2009), and she was on the organization's Executive Council. On March 1st, in her 85th year, in the company of Liz Nichols and Michael Irwin, two close friends and also members of the SOARS Executive Council, Nan had a doctor-assisted suicide in Switzerland, because of the very severe suffering she was experiencing due to extensive arthritis.

In a statement, released soon after her death, Nan Maitland wrote – *“For some time, my life has consisted of more pain than pleasure, and over the next months and years, the pain will be more and the pleasure less. I have a great feeling of relief that I will have no further need to struggle through each day in dread of what further horrors may lie in wait. For many years, I have feared the long period of decline, sometimes called ‘prolonged dwindling’, that so many people unfortunately experience before they die. Please be happy for me that I have been able to escape from this, for me, unbearable future. I have had a wonderful life, and the good fortune to die at a time of my own choosing.....”*

On April 3rd, The Sunday Times carried an extensive report on Nan Maitland's dignified doctor-assisted suicide, beginning on its front page (this newspaper's Health Editor had been one of her friends). In the following week, every major paper in the UK (and even papers in Australia and South Africa) reported on Nan's death. Furthermore, there were many radio interviews with Michael Irwin, in England, and Libby Wilson, in Scotland (the latter is the convener of Friends At The End, with which Nan had also been much involved: FATE and SOARS have always cooperated closely).

Nan Maitland would have been delighted by the extensive media coverage of her death, which also generated a great deal of interest in SOARS.

## INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

In February, the Board of the World Federation of Right-to-Die Societies gave its approval for SOARS to join this global organization – thus, uniting it with forty-four other right-to-die societies around the world.

Also, in February, Michael Irwin (the co-ordinator of SOARS) was in Amsterdam to meet with some of those involved in the campaign group Uit Vrije Wil (“One's Own Free Will”) in The Netherlands, which has several similar objectives to SOARS. Hundreds of thousands of Dutch citizens have shown their support, and a draft law has been prepared for parliamentary discussion – however, the subsequent legislative process is expected to take several years.



## NATIONAL POLL – MARCH

This third SOARS-commissioned poll occurred between March 4th and 6th. As in 2010, this was undertaken by ICM and Kindle Research. But, this time, it was in two parts. The first was conducted by telephone and involved interviewing 1,008 adults throughout the UK: the second was an online poll in which a total of 2,024 individuals were questioned.

The telephone poll showed that 76% of those contacted supported a doctor being legally allowed to assist a terminally-ill person to die; and that 66% agreed with a very elderly, mentally competent individual, suffering severely from a serious medical condition (like Nan Maitland) also being entitled to legalized doctor-assisted dying. These are very similar results to those obtained in the two previous polls, last year.

Interestingly, the online ICM poll produced somewhat lower results – 73% supporting doctor-assisted dying for those who are terminally ill, and 60% in favour of old age rational suicide. There are two possible explanations for this. Firstly, those who were questioned online may have considered the ethical and legal implications more carefully; and secondly, the lack of an interviewer (as in a telephone call) removed the pressure to give a socially acceptable answer.

The main results of this March 2011 poll were reported, in April, in many newspapers (ranging from The Sunday Times to the Daily Express) and in several radio programmes (both national, such as BBC Radio 5 Live, and international, such as NPR, in the United States).

Detailed analysis of these poll results can be seen on the SOARS website ([www.soars.org.uk](http://www.soars.org.uk)).

## RECENT UK ACTIVITIES

In December, Michael Irwin represented SOARS at a conference organized by the National Council for Palliative Care, Dementia UK, and the Alzheimer's Society, on "Achieving a Good Death with Dementia". Following this, he became a member of the national coalition "Dying Matters".

During the past six months, talks on "Old Age Rational Suicide" have been given in several locations, ranging from Bristol (in January, at the launch of "Euthanasia", an educational DVD, produced by "Classroom Video", which also introduces the concept of old age rational suicide) to London (in April, to the South Place Ethical Society).

On January 20th, Michael Irwin appeared on the Channel Four series "4thought.tv", to stress the importance of involving a doctor in any "assisted suicide" and the vital role that compassion should play.

In March, SOARS submitted evidence to the Commission on Assisted Dying, chaired by Lord Falconer, which, throughout 2011, is investigating the circumstances when it should be possible for people to be assisted to die. By the end of this year, this Commission will recommend what system, if any, should exist in England and Wales for this to be possible.

## FUTURE EVENTS

On May 6th, in London, SOARS will be much involved in a FATE meeting on "Advance Decisions and Dementia" at which the speaker will be Professor Isky Gordon, from Healthcare Professionals for Assisted Dying (he is also a member of the Board of Dignity in Dying).

The second Annual SOARS Lecture will be given, in London, on October 14th by Virginia Ironside, author, journalist and raconteur.

## USEFUL QUOTES

*"We have delayed death but we cannot really delay ageing...it is the protracted dying of the aged that is unnatural. Nowadays we die slowly, with different parts of us dying at different rates...actual bodily death is currently preceded by...years of chronic ill health"*

**Nan Maitland, in the FATE Newsletter, January 2011**

*"People can face real horrors at the end of life, simply because we cannot face dealing with the issue of how people should exit life"*

**Dr. Guy Brown, in "The Living End" (Macmillan Press, 2008)**

*"I don't like the idea of lingering. If it's going to happen let it happen; not all this hanging on dying inch by inch, fighting every scrap of the way"*

**A hospice patient, quoted in "The Dying Process" by Julia Lawton (Routledge, 2000)**

*"The world's population, aged over 80, is projected to increase 233% between 2008 and 2040, compared with 160% for the population aged 65 and over, and 33% for the population of all ages"*

**US Census Bureau 2009, as reported on [www.agebomb.com](http://www.agebomb.com), a forum for the discussion of the ageing population.**

*"Death is now more often a gradual process rather than a sudden, cataclysmic event...the danger is that the extra years will prove more curse than blessing"*

**John Humphrys in "The Welcome Visitor" (Hodder & Stoughton, 2009)**

*"We do not appear to be moving to a world where we die without experiencing significant periods of disease, functioning loss, and disability"*

**Dr. Eileen Crimmins of the University of Southern California, reported in The Daily Telegraph, December 16, 2010**

*"Us oldies have had years and years to get used to the idea of death. We shouldn't be so weedy about it, we shouldn't dread it. We should set a good example to the young, and teach them, too, to welcome death, when life gets too wretched or, even, when it's clear that we've spent quite enough time at the party and our hosts are starting to yawn and look at the clock"*

**Virginia Ironside in "The Virginia Monologues" (Penguin Books, 2010)**

