



ANNE “FROM SUSSEX” – AN EXAMPLE OF OLD AGE RATIONAL SUICIDE

A sensational headline in The Sunday Times of April 6th read “Digital age drove auntie to Dignitas”. But, a careful reading of this report revealed the true situation of a very independent, unmarried lady, aged 89, only identified as Anne “from Sussex”, who had ended her life, with her niece beside her, in Switzerland eleven days earlier. In recent years, Anne had suffered progressively from both cardiac and lung problems, together with osteoarthritis. Last year, she had experienced the “unadulterated hell” of eleven days in hospital - and, she was very concerned that a further deterioration in her health would result in her going into a nursing home or returning to hospital. Anne had been raised in Kenya, and had worked as an art teacher in Australia and in France. She had very strong views about how “life” was now so different (from the “excessive dependence on technology” to a lack of “good manners”) - and this produced the initial headline.

Michael Irwin, the Co-ordinator of SOARS, had helped Anne in making the lengthy preparations for her final trip to Zurich. And, in The Sunday Times, he stated that “Anne found, at 89, that her daily activities were increasingly restricted due to her various ailments. She felt that her life was now complete”.

Following the report in The Sunday Times, coverage of Anne’s death appeared in detail in many other national newspapers, online the same day, and in their print versions on April 7th (in fact, it was the only story on the front page of The Daily Mirror on April 7th). Internationally, reports appeared in newspapers as far away as Japan and New Zealand. In addition, Michael gave several radio interviews that week, and even participated in a discussion about Anne on the “Voice of Russia” on April 14th, stressing that Anne’s carefully planned doctor-assisted death was a good example of old age rational suicide.

One week later, SOARS provided The Sunday Express with an exclusive report on a 99-year old lady, from London, whose life was increasingly difficult due to several medical conditions, who had also received a doctor-assisted suicide in Switzerland in April. It was noted that this lady “was not terminally ill, nor was she particularly severely disabled, yet (at 99) she could not find much enjoyment in living any more and felt the time was right to say goodbye”.

LONDON SPRING MEETING

On April 25th, a well-attended FATE (Friends At The End) and SOARS meeting, in central London, heard excellent presentations from Celia Kitzinger (from the University of York) and Sue Wilkinson (from Loughborough University) on the importance of detailed and well-written Advance Decisions (still popularly called “Living Wills”). Both speakers have done extensive research recently for Compassion in Dying (which is associated with Dignity in Dying) on the preparation of such documents. Afterwards, both speakers gave personal advice to several members of the audience regarding their own Advance Decisions.



All those present, at this meeting, were given copies of the draft Assisted Suicide (Scotland) Bill which is presently being discussed in the Health and Sport Committee of the Scottish Parliament, in Edinburgh, and then they were advised by Hugh Wynne (from Glasgow, who is on the FATE Council) about how they can, even living in England, send their personal comments to this Committee.

There was a brief discussion about the Die-alogue group which was established by several SOARS Supporters in Brighton and Hove last year - it is likely now that a similar group will be formed in north London soon.

OTHER PUBLIC MEETINGS

During the past six months, there have been talks given on “Old Age Rational Suicide” at public meetings in Brighton and Hove (on January 21st), Bristol (February 10th), and in Chelmsford (March 16th). The meeting in Bristol was organized by that city’s Secular Society and was held in a pub called Smoke and Mirrors (a rather appropriate title when one thinks about the manner in which some compassionate doctors in the UK today illegally help their mentally competent, seriously-ill patients to die!). At these meetings, there are always several individuals who agree to become SOARS Supporters.

At the Cambridge Union, on January 16th, when Michael Irwin was one of the six main speakers in a debate on “This House would legalise Assisted Dying”, he made several references to the possibility of old age rational suicide being legally possible one day in the UK. The motion was approved by 207 votes to 67, with 54 abstentions.

(At the biennial global conference of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies, to be held in Chicago in September, there will be a half-day session entitled “Breaking Barriers: Controversial Issues”, when the two subjects to be considered will be “Dementia” and “Old Age Rational Suicide”. SOARS is a member of the World Federation, and will be leading the discussion on the second topic)

MEDIA INTEREST IN OLD AGE RATIONAL SUICIDE

On November 7, 2013, Michael Irwin was one of the three main participants in a Voice of America international televised debate on “Euthanasia” (in its “On The Line” series of discussions) - this resulted in many e-mails, from around the world, inquiring about SOARS.

On December 27th, BBC Radio 4 repeated an interview from its “One to One” series - which had previously been broadcast last May - in which Ritula Shah discussed with Michael Irwin how someone can “renounce life in old age or when faced with a terminal illness”.

During these six months, there have been other radio interviews - when SOARS has been mentioned - on BBC Northern Ireland (December 22nd), Eagle Radio (January 21st), LBC (February 14th), BBC Northern Ireland (February 18th), and BBC Three Counties (February 27th).

In the magazine section of The Financial Times, on March 15th, there was a four-page article about the prolonged death of an elderly man in which there were extensive interviews with Colin Brewer and Michael Irwin (who had both served on the Executive Board of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society in the 1990s). Other press reports, involving SOARS, have appeared in Humanism Ireland (November-December 2013), The Daily Telegraph (December 20th), The Sunday Times (January 12th), The Argus (January 27th), The Daily Mirror (February 15th), The Sunday Times (February 16th), The Financial Times (March 22nd), and The Daily Mail (April 14th).

During four evenings in late February, Channel Five TV News broadcast extensive reports on “Dementia”. On February 27th, Michael Irwin was interviewed at home and stated that SOARS believes that, in the early stages of this disease, when an individual is usually still mentally competent, there should be the option of a doctor-assisted suicide. Also, he stressed the importance of advance decisions for informing one’s family and personal doctor about the medical care someone would want if that person was no longer mentally competent (such as with advanced dementia) - and a Channel Five and YouGov poll, conducted during this week, revealed that 61%, of the 1,047 adults questioned “supported assisted dying for dementia patients who can no longer recognise their family if they had expressed the wish to die when they were still mentally capable”.

FIFTH ANNUAL SOARS LECTURE, AND SOARS AGM - OCTOBER 31ST.

On the afternoon of October 31st, in central London, Professor Jan Bernheim, from Brussels, will describe the euthanasia policy and practices existing today in Belgium - where, in the Flanders area of this country, the possibility of voluntary euthanasia is integrated into the palliative care services. The Annual General Meeting of SOARS will be held after he has spoken - during the coming months, all SOARS Supporters will be invited to consider standing for the five-member Executive Council.

USEFUL QUOTES

“The 20th century added an extra 30 years to life expectancy in the developed world”

From a report in *The Economist*, November 16, 2013.

In an interview with Terry Pratchett, reported in *The Sunday Times* on December 1, 2013, it was noted that “while the author has said he would have an assisted suicide if he felt the time had come, he is concerned about those who are in a less privileged position - he was quoted as saying “Let it be said that I have the money and the people to make certain that I know when I am going to die”

“The elderly need to be able to plan ahead clearly, and to make their own choices about when their lives are no longer worth living. There seems to be some conspiracy to stop us thinking about the end game we all shall play....How wonderful it would be if we knew that we would not be obliged to contemplate the bodily and mental decay that threatens us all”

Dame Margaret Drabble, writing in *The Guardian* on January 2, 2014.

“Britain’s population is ageing fast. The number of people older than 85 is expected to double by 2030”

From *The Economist*, January 4, 2014.

“The medical and scientific communities appear to be hell-bent on extending human life, whether through diet or medication or genetic manipulation.....We need a more considered and rational allocation of resources”

John Kellie (from a letter in *The Daily Telegraph*, March 6, 2014).

“Suicide is always wrong – unless you’re 80 and in agony”

Columnist Vicki Woods, quoted in *The Daily Telegraph*, March 29, 2014.



“ DOES IT CONTAIN NUTS? ”

*This is reprinted from *The Oldie* magazine*