



### INCREASING NUMBER OF CENTENARIANS

According to a study by the UK Office for National Statistics, published in late September, the number of Britons living to see their 100th birthday is expected to rise eightfold to more than 100,000 over the next 25 years. Already, in this country, it is estimated that there are 12,640 centenarians alive today, five times as many as in 1980.

And, of course, there will be a corresponding large increase, by 2036, in the number of Britons over the age of 85 – in fact, it is likely that one person in twenty, in 25 years, will be in this group.

Unfortunately, although many people are living longer now throughout the world, an increasing number of these individuals are spending more of their extra time alive suffering from sickness than in the past. In the early stages of old age, many can cope. But, as people progress into their late 80s and 90s, there is more likely to be a gradual decline, both physical and psychological. Then, when the unrelenting burdens of being alive exceed the pleasures of living, competent persons will get to the tipping point of longing for death. As Minette Marin, a columnist for The Sunday Times noted, on April 17th, “degenerative illnesses, constant pain and the nightmarish dwindling we all dread are excellent reasons for wanting, very rationally, to die... old people who decide to take their lives... are to be admired and thanked. They are sparing themselves and their families a great deal of suffering... surely that is an honourable act”.

### TWO PUBLIC MEETINGS

On May 6th, SOARS combined with Friends At The End, the British national right-to-die society based in Glasgow, to hold a meeting in London on “Advance Decisions and Dementia” – a very important subject as it is estimated by the Alzheimer’s Society that “one in three people over 65, in the UK, will die with dementia”. Our speaker was Professor Isky Gordon, a consultant physician, who was recently on the Board of Dignity in Dying. Today, more and more people, in this country, seem interested in having an advance decision because of their personal concerns about developing a dementia themselves. At this meeting, it was noted that many individuals are not correctly diagnosed in the early stages of dementia when – if they do not already have an advance decision – it is still possible, and so important, that one should be written.

On October 14th, the second Annual SOARS Lecture was given in London – by Virginia Ironside, the author and journalist, who writes regularly for The Independent newspaper and The Oldie magazine. Unlike the more usual right-to-die subjects, considered by FATE, SOARS, and similar organizations, her talk on “Personal Views on Life, Old Age, Death and other Mysteries” led afterwards to many opinions being given on these matters, generally supporting the concept of “old age rational suicide”. Several of the interesting – and, sometimes somewhat light-hearted – comments made, at this event, are given on the SOARS website, under “Annual Lecture”.



## OTHER SOARS ACTIVITIES

During the past six months, talks on “Old Age Rational Suicide” have been given to various audiences (such as students and humanist societies) in Brighton, Bromley, Glasgow and London.

Magazine coverage on the activities of SOARS has appeared in the Ethical Record (May issue), The Freethinker (June), and in The Oldie (October). Radio interviews – regarding old age rational suicide – ranged from Radio 5 Live (May 15th), BBC Radio Kent (June 7th), and BBC Surrey Sussex (June 14th), to BBC West Midlands (September 10th). And, TV coverage occurred on BBC South (September 7th).

Because a 91-year old lady in Sussex, suffering severely from arthritis, considered travelling to Switzerland to end her life there, reports on this possibility, together with the fact that Michael Irwin, the SOARS Co-ordinator, had been in touch with her and had been questioned by the local police, appeared in several regional newspapers such as the Brighton and Hove Argus (from September 6th to 9th), and the West Sussex County Times (September 15th). An extensive report also appeared in The Daily Telegraph (September 10th).

One of the main activities of SOARS is to promote the wider acceptance and use of advance decisions (still popularly called “living wills” in the UK). In The Sunday Times of June 5th, under the title “Living wills can save NHS a fortune”, Michael Irwin described how “in the early 1990s, an American study of 474 patients who died in a hospital in Pennsylvania showed that the mean in-patient charges for this final period of hospitalization for the 342 without living wills were more than three times that of the 132 with such wills who wished to have no further treatment”, with the additional comment that “one way to reduce National Health Service costs is to encourage all adults, especially the elderly, to have advance decisions that doctors are legally bound to respect since the Mental Capacity Act came into force in 2007”. Thus, advance decisions – when these refuse further medical treatment – can be a high cost benefit to Society and, at the same time, honour the wishes and the autonomy of individuals.

On June 8th, Michael Irwin represented SOARS at a national conference held at the Royal Society of Medicine, in London, on “Decision-making and practice in clinically assisted nutrition and hydration at the end of life”.

In September, the results of the SOARS-commissioned ICM telephone poll conducted nationally last March (showing a 66% general support for old age rational suicide) were presented in the latest “Issues” publication produced by Independence Educational Publishers (in Cambridge) on “Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide” – this is used in GCSE, A-level and further education courses.

## INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

In Switzerland, in May, voters in the canton of Zurich (where Dignitas is located) fortunately rejected (by 78% to 22%) an attempt to prevent foreigners travelling there for a doctor-assisted suicide. The following month, the Swiss government decided that the current law is sufficient to regulate the assisted suicide procedures available in that country. Also, in May, EXIT Deutsche Schweiz (the right-to-die society in the German-speaking area of Switzerland, which provides an assisted suicide, when necessary, to its members) amended its statutes to reduce the “unnecessary hurdles placed in the way of the aged who are of sound mind and wish to die”.

In The Netherlands, to assist the present efforts to get parliamentary approval to allow elderly Dutch nationals to receive professional help for an assisted suicide, the Dutch Physicians Association (KNMG), in September, produced a supportive position paper, with its chairman stating that, among the very elderly, a “constellation of factors” could cause “unbearable and lasting suffering” when “euthanasia should be allowed”.

At the biennial conference of Right-to-Die Europe (which consists of twenty-one national right-to-die societies in Europe), in Luxembourg in September, SOARS, a member of this regional group, was represented by Liz Nichols, a member of its Executive Council.

In October, Michael Irwin was in Amsterdam to arrange for the English translation of a report on the recent developments in The Netherlands to legalize old age rational suicide – this publication will be funded by SOARS.

## USEFUL QUOTES

“I have seen many cases where I would choose suicide rather than endure a prolonged, tortured end. People should have the right to die in a manner of their own choosing, and I feel uneasy about the paternalistic elements within medicine which interfere with this” – Dr. Max Pemberton, in *The Daily Telegraph*, May 9, 2011.

“The end is nigh: Brighton’s crumbling West Pier is a symbol of life’s decay” – *The Daily Telegraph*, June 18, 2011 (this derelict pier, once a place of great excitement and pleasure, has been the logo for SOARS since its establishment, in Brighton and Hove, in December 2009)

“Living to a ripe old age should be a cause for celebration. Alas, many elderly people live in fear of how they will endure it” – *The Economist*, July 9, 2011.

“I believe we should die before the ravages of old age really damage us” – Lewis Wolpert, Emeritus Professor of Biology as Applied to Medicine, at University College, London (quoted in *The Oldie* in its Summer issue 2011)

“Staff at two teaching hospitals have donned an innovative ageing simulation suit that enables them to experience life as an older person. Nurses at Guy’s and St. Thomas’s Hospitals in London wore the suit to gain a better understanding of the challenges facing older patients” – *Nursing Times* (August 2011)

“Many of us would like to have some control over the time and manner of our deaths, should we find ourselves in a condition so hopeless that there is no point in going on... if continued life would bring nothing but misery, then a death that relieves us of that misery is not bad but good” – Thomas Nagel in the *London Review of Books* (September 2011)

“Jain texts say santhara (a voluntary fasting to death) is the ultimate route to attaining moksha (freedom from the cycle of birth and death) and is resorted to when one feels that life has served its purpose” – *The Times of India*, March 8, 2011

“All our lives we are told we must take responsibility for our choices, yet on this one vital topic (old age rational suicide) we are denied the right to do that without the most appalling and undignified brawl” – a letter from a supporter of SOARS received on August 17, 2011

