



STEADY SUPPORT FOR OLD AGE RATIONAL SUICIDE

On March 8th, 9th, and 10th, ICM (a national organization which does extensive research for the British media, such as The Guardian and the BBC) and Kindle Research (based in Brighton and Hove) conducted telephone and online opinion polls throughout the UK - as on previous occasions, these polls were commissioned by SOARS.

In the telephone poll (of 1,002 adults), 78% agreed that a mentally competent adult, who is terminally ill, should legally be allowed to receive a doctor's assistance to die. And, of great importance to SOARS, 70% supported the possibility of such assistance being provided to very elderly, competent individuals who are suffering unbearably from a variety of medical problems, if this is their persistent request. In March 2011, in a similar ICM poll, 66% supported the idea of old age rational suicide; and, in July 2010, the figure had been 67%.

In the March 2013 ICM online poll (of 2,000 adults), 71% agreed with terminally-ill, mentally competent adults being assisted to die, if this was their final choice; and 60% were in favour of old age rational suicide. In March 2011, the figures had been 73% and 60% respectively.

Two possible explanations for less support, from online polling, are that those participating in such surveys are very carefully considering the legal and moral implications involved, and that the absence of an interviewer (as in telephone polls) removes any pressure to give a socially correct response.

The main result of this March 2013 poll was exclusively presented in The Sunday Times of March 17th, along with the report of John, a SOARS Supporter, aged 83, who, because of early dementia, was travelling to Dignitas the following week for a doctor-assisted suicide. Later, other newspapers, such as The Daily Mail, and the BBC (from BBC South to BBC Humberside) repeated these details. A new edition of the SOARS Supporter form, giving the latest poll result, has been printed. The full results of the latest ICM polls can be seen on the SOARS website.

MARCH MEETING

On March 15th, a combined FATE (Friends At The End) and SOARS meeting, in London, heard reports from Sarah Wootton (Chief Executive of Dignity in Dying) on the main aspects of Lord Falconer's "Assisted Dying Bill" which will be presented to the House of Lords in May; and from Peter Warren (Parliamentary Assistant to Margo MacDonald MSP) on the draft "Assisted Suicide (Scotland) Bill" which will be discussed in the Scottish Parliament, in Edinburgh, later this year. Lord Falconer's Bill is limited to providing medical assistance to die to the "terminally ill". The Margo MacDonald Bill will provide similar legalized assistance to potentially more suffering individuals (not only to those considered to be terminally ill).

LORD FALCONER'S "ASSISTED DYING BILL"

SOARS has contributed to the public consultation process which has been held on this draft Bill. In particular, we have stressed that, if "terminal illness" is defined, as it is in the present draft, as someone "with a prognosis of twelve months or less to live", then, if that person decides to die early in this one-year period, their death is essentially an "assisted suicide", and not "assisted dying" (which is applicable when someone is much closer to death). Generally, elsewhere in Europe, no time definition is given for a "terminal illness" (in Oregon and Washington State, the period is "six months").

Also, SOARS has emphasized that it is vital that a qualified person (such as a doctor or a nurse) must be present at the moment of death, both to reassure the individual dying as well as those family members or friends who may be in the room (the draft Bill only states that "the doctor or nurse remains on the premises, but does not have to be in the same room"). We feel that this is very important - otherwise, there is a great danger of "botched suicides".

PUBLIC ACTIVITIES

During the past six months, Michael Irwin, the SOARS Co-ordinator, has given talks about old age rational suicide to groups in Brighton (ranging from the local Fabian Society to the Law Society at the University of Sussex), in Oxford (during that city's "Think Week" in February), and in London (to the West London Humanists and Secularists Society). Also, presentations have been made to students at City University (in London), at Exeter University, and at the University of Brighton.

SOARS was represented at the Spring Liberal Democrat conference in Brighton, in early March - this is the only major British political party which supports doctor-assisted dying.

References to SOARS have appeared in various publications - ranging from Prospect magazine (December 2012) to The Oldie (February 2013).

INTERNATIONAL LINKS

In March, Michael Irwin met Geraldine Schmidt, the new Team Leader of EX International: this Swiss organization, based in Bern, is willing (like Dignitas, in Zurich, and Lifecircle, in Basle) to help non-Swiss nationals with a doctor-assisted suicide (and, since 2008, several elderly Britons have travelled to Bern for an old age rational suicide).

And, in April, he was in Amsterdam to review what is happening in The Netherlands. The citizen's initiative (Uit Vrije Wil - "One's Own Free Will") which began in 2010 is increasingly campaigning for parliamentary discussion of its main objectives (which are similar to SOARS). And, a November 2012 report showed that 10% of euthanasia and doctor-assisted suicide deaths, in The Netherlands, are now because of a "completed life". During this visit, Michael Irwin met Dr. Rob Jonquiere, a former Chief Executive of the main Dutch right-to-die society, NVVE, who will be giving the Fourth Annual SOARS Lecture, in London in September, on "Dying Assistance for the Elderly in The Netherlands".

DIE-ALOGUE GROUPS

Small local groups of SOARS Supporters are being formed to meet periodically to have a “Die-alogue” on their possible end-of-life care options (in particular, focusing on the importance of up-to-date, very detailed advance decisions). The first group met in Brighton and Hove on April 17th. Before this meeting happened, The Argus, the daily newspaper in Brighton and Hove, reported (on March 18th) on the establishment of this local group, and further reports appeared the following day in The Daily Telegraph and The Daily Mail as well as on BBC South East. “Die-alogue” is a new word which seems to appeal to many! And, a specific website - www.die-alogue.org.uk - has been created, outlining the general aims of these Die-alogue Groups.

USEFUL QUOTES

“...a typical cross section of those in their early eighties, each having at least three medical conditions (or “co-morbidities”) - hypertension, heart disease, osteoporosis, depression and so on”

From a statement by Dr Doron Garfinkel of the Shoham Centre for Geriatric Medicine in Israel, reported on November 19, 2012.

“Although it is good news that, for a variety of reasons, ‘We are living longer than we thought’ (report, December 18), it should be remembered that, generally, while every year’s rise in life expectancy produces 42 weeks of healthy life, it also brings 10 weeks of illness - thus heaping even greater stresses on the NHS”

A letter from Michael Irwin which appeared in The Daily Telegraph on December 28, 2012.

“The number of pensioners is forecast to go up by half by 2030, and over-85s to double, leading to a big rise in those with multiple long-term health conditions.....England and Wales has the fourth highest number of over-90s in the world. Japan had the largest aged population, followed by Sweden and Italy”

A report from the Office of National Statistics, released on March 21, 2013.

“As a society and a culture, we have grown squeamish about death.....Now we seem only to have avoidance. So we ‘battle’ with illness, as if it is a fight we can always win if we just try hard enough. And we fool ourselves, right up to the last minute, that we are immortal, that death is something that happens to other people, but not us”

Peter Stanford, in comments on his new book, How to Read a Graveyard, on March 23, 2013.

