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A note from DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity

Review of the year 2023 and outlook for 2024

Working towards a self-determined end of life at one’s own place of residence; Suicide attempt prevention remains at the core of the advisory work

In 2023, the long-standing international legal commitment of the non-profit membership association “DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity” and the political activities for the (human) right to self-determination regarding one’s own end in life were continued. A case initiated by DIGNITAS against France is pending at the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR). In Switzerland, the association focused on securing access to assisted suicide for residents of public homes. In the operational area, the comprehensive advisory work for individuals seeking help and suicide attempt prevention remained at the core of DIGNITAS’ activities.

“DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity” (abbreviated: “DIGNITAS”) is a non-profit membership association. Through its activities it empowers people to self-determinedly shape their life in regard of health and end of life and moreover to decide on the manner and time of their own end in life. This is especially significant in countries where such freedom does not yet exist. With open-outcome advisory work on suicide attempt prevention, advance directives, palliative care and accompanied suicide DIGNITAS offers its members, their families, and others who are interested the necessary basis for decision-making. The DIGNITAS team consists of 38 part-time employees in advisory work, accompanying, member administration, bookkeeping, law and politics, communications, and the board. Additionally, the association is supported by several external experts in the fields of medicine, law, IT, and auditing.

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2023: Working towards a self-determined end of life at one's own place of residence

On Wednesday, 17 May 2023 DIGNITAS celebrated its 25th anniversary. In the 25 years of its operation, the association has advised tens of thousands of individuals on their end-of-life options and has achieved significant successes regarding freedom of choice and self-determination in life and at the end of life – in Switzerland and worldwide¹.

DIGNITAS persistently pursued its legal and political activities in 2023. The association's aim is to enforce the human right and freedom of every individual to decide on the manner and time of their own end of life, as confirmed, in principle, by the Swiss Federal Supreme Court in 2006 and the European Court of Human Rights in 2011².

France was a main focus. DIGNITAS has been taking legal action against the ban on assisted suicide in France for several years. In spring 2023, 31 people living in France, represented by a Parisian lawyer, filed applications against the French state with the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)³. This legal action was initiated and coordinated by DIGNITAS. The ECtHR decided to communicate the applications to the French government, which means that proceedings will be initiated⁴. However, it will be some time before the ECtHR makes its judgment in this case, "A. and others v. FRANCE".

As part of its political work, DIGNITAS was invited to share its knowledge and experience in a number of debates and parliamentary committee hearings on end-of-life choice regulations, including in the UK, Scotland, and South Korea.

In 2023, the association paid special attention to Switzerland, where various cantons are currently discussing access of assisted suicide organisations to old people's and nursing homes. Today, in most cantons, it is up to the home's management to decide whether to allow assisted suicide on its premises. However, refusing access is a clear violation of the residents' right to self-determination. Forcing someone to leave the home, i.e., their last place of residence, in order to be able to make use of this right and freedom of choice, is unacceptable – especially if the home is co-funded by the state.

In 2023, an initiative committee, of which DIGNITAS is a member, launched the popular initiative "Self-determination at the end of life, also in retirement and nursing homes"⁵ in the canton of Zurich. The cantonal initiative demands that seriously ill and suffering individuals who wish to make use of assisted suicide should be able to remain in their place of residence, which can also be a retirement home or care institution, and that this right should also be enshrined in law. Within a very short time, 13,000 signatures were collected. A total of 6,000 signatures were required. The Zurich cantonal council will decide on the initiative in the foreseeable future. If it does not find a majority, the proposal will be put to a people's vote.

The legal-political work of DIGNITAS (court judgments, reports, submissions, comments, etc) is documented at www.dignitas.ch.

¹ <http://www.dignitas.ch/images/stories/pdf/medienmitteilung-17052023-e.pdf>

² Judgment by the ECtHR of 20 January 2011, case Haas v. Switzerland, <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng/?i=001-102940>

³ <http://www.dignitas.ch/images/stories/pdf/medienmitteilung-22052023-e.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.dignitas.ch/images/stories/pdf/medienmitteilung-25092023-e.pdf>

⁵ <http://selbstbestimmung-auch-im-heim.ch/> (in German)

Suicide attempt prevention at the core of advisory work

The prevention of suicide attempts is at the core of the comprehensive advisory work of DIGNITAS. Only by taking a person seriously in his or her desire to end their suffering and life for whatever reason, openly exploring all options and offering a real emergency exit and thus enabling an open-outcome conversation, is it possible to prevent a rise in the pressures resulting from hopelessness and despair which could otherwise lead someone to attempt a high-risk lonely suicide.

In 2023, DIGNITAS continued to receive dozens of e-mails, letters and calls every day from all over the world. About one third of the daily telephone advisory work is provided to non-members who receive free-of-charge initial advice. Individuals seeking help often lack the information they need to make a decision about different ways and options to improve their quality of life. With open-outcome advisory work on suicide attempt prevention, advance directives, palliative care and accompanied suicide, DIGNITAS offers its members, their families and others who are interested the necessary basis for decision-making. Accompanied suicide is only one topic among others.

Further activities

DIGNITAS finances its activities mostly through membership fees. As of the end of 2023, DIGNITAS counted 13,775 members⁶.

Individuals who become members of DIGNITAS do not usually do so because they want to die but because they want to support the broad activities of the association and to have the safety of choice. Less than 3% of all DIGNITAS members make use of an accompanied suicide; 250 individuals in 2023⁷. In recent years, less than 50% of all DIGNITAS members whose request for an accompanied suicide was assessed by a Swiss physician independent of DIGNITAS actually chose to make use of their “last human right”.

Advisory work, as well as preparing and carrying out an accompanied suicide is very labour-intensive and complex, especially with individuals from outside Switzerland. The costs associated with it cannot always be fully borne by the members themselves. Sometimes, even the 80 Swiss Francs annual membership subscription is a hurdle. As a charitable, non-profit member society DIGNITAS is open to all persons, irrespective of their financial situation. If need be, based on its statutes, DIGNITAS reduces or even completely waives fees on reasoned request. In 2023, DIGNITAS granted 154,038 Swiss Francs in reduction of fees.

DIGNITAS attaches great importance to quality in all of its processes. These are continuously reviewed and adjusted as necessary. The auditing firm BDO AG, which is the organisation’s official finance controlling body, carried out a review of the 2022 annual financial statements of DIGNITAS and found them to be without fault. The auditing complements the activities of an independent tax lawyer, as well as the tax authorities, which monitor DIGNITAS’ bookkeeping.

In most Western countries, the vast majority of the population wishes to have access to professionally supported accompanied suicide⁸. Despite the fact that assisted suicide and/or voluntary euthanasia are being legalised in a growing number of countries, freedom of choice and the right to a self-determined end of one’s own life are not always sufficiently taken into consideration by national laws,

⁶ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32&Itemid=72&lang=en

⁷ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=32&Itemid=72&lang=en

⁸ http://www.dignitas.ch/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=70&Itemid=138&lang=en

jurisdictions and health systems. DIGNITAS contributes to remedying this situation by providing information and advice to political decision-makers, public officials, private institutions, and the public.

DIGNITAS' extensive know-how on suicide attempt prevention, safeguarding quality of life and self-determination in regard of one's own end of life is appreciated and drawn upon both in Switzerland and worldwide. In addition to the daily comprehensive and open-outcome advisory work with individuals seeking help, DIGNITAS makes its experience from 25 years of international efforts available to interested parties in Switzerland and abroad, through speeches, presentations, panel discussions, receiving experts and delegations from Switzerland and abroad etc.

Providing supporting information for specialized articles, reports and documentaries is part of this engagement, just as much as responding to countless inquiries by school pupils, undergraduates, PhD students, doctorates, researchers, journalists, and other interested parties.

Outlook on 2024

Quality of life until the end, self-determination and real freedom of choice combined with individual responsibility and advance planning are values which are not available as a matter of course. Even though assisted suicide and/or voluntary euthanasia have become possible within a certain framework in a number of countries in recent years, or soon will be, in many countries religiously affiliated moralists, self-proclaimed experts and alleged pro-lifers take every opportunity to deny citizens human rights, patient autonomy and self-determination, putting power over questions of life and death even more firmly in the hands of the church, medicine and politics.

No one should have to make the journey to Switzerland to exercise their right to decide on the manner and time of their own end in life; the association remains committed to this goal. From a liberal perspective, it is important to regulate only where it is actually necessary for the safe exercise of a right, and to ensure that laws do not restrict the very right they claim to grant. In Switzerland, too, where assisted suicide has now been established practice for 40 years, it is essential to continue ensuring this freedom and creating the conditions for individuals to be able to decide themselves about the end of their life and to be professionally advised, supported, and accompanied for this purpose if they so wish.

Key figures at a glance

Date of foundation of the member society:	17 May 1998
Employees as of end of 2023:	38 (all part-time)
Members as of end of 2023:	13,775 (incl. DIGNITAS-Germany)
Accompanied suicides in 2023:	250
Investment in international legal further development 2023:	CHF 74,045
Reduction and exemption of fees in 2023:	CHF 154,038
Minimum annual subscription:	CHF 80
Membership fee for an accompanied suicide:	CHF 2,500 (exception: reduction / exemption)
Donations in 2023:	CHF 126,427

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BACKGROUND:

DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – To die with dignity was founded in May 1998 with the aim, through international legal and political work, to make the proven Swiss model of freedom of choice, self-determination and personal responsibility in life and at life's end also accessible to individuals abroad.

DIGNITAS' advisory concept – combining palliative care, suicide attempt prevention, advance directives/decisions and assisted dying – offers a basis for good decision-making to shape life until the end.

Through litigation, DIGNITAS obtained a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in 2011 acknowledging the right/freedom of a competent individual to decide on the manner and time of his or her own end in life and confirming this to be protected by Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

DIGNITAS has been engaged in many lawsuits in Europe and Canada and has provided in-depth submissions and received visits by expert and parliamentary committees from Great Britain, Australia, Canada, etc. when laws were discussed and planned for the protection of a patient's autonomy and human dignity.

The founder of the charitable DIGNITAS organisation is Ludwig A. Minelli, an attorney-at-law specialising in human rights. The team of DIGNITAS consists of 38 part-time employees and it is supported by several external experts in the fields of medicine, law, IT, and auditing.