

Exit International Biennial Conference 2005

On 5th and 6th of November of last year my wife and I attended the third biennial conference of *Exit International*, held in Brisbane, together with well over two hundred fifty other people, most of whom were passionate believers in voluntary euthanasia and, I must say, mostly elderly. Despite what the usual sceptics say, there was no outward sign of depression or morbidity. There was a joie de vivre and general good feeling among the participants.

The conference was opened by Dr Philip Nitschke, who gave an overview of the reasons and policies behind the formation of *Exit International*. His view, expressed quite cogently and persuasively, was that legislators are loathe to change the law and will continue to ignore the popular demand for legalising voluntary euthanasia. Without legislation health professionals are unable to help patients and accede to their request for a quick and gentle death. Without the help of health professionals, the general public will have to take matters into their own hands. Suicide is not illegal, but some of the common methods used to commit suicide are certainly not gentle and peaceful. So *Exit International* has taken it upon itself to educate, facilitate and make it possible for any competent adult to gather knowledge about and, if necessary, use various methods to achieve a peaceful death.

We were given the opportunity to hear various interesting speakers, some presenting their views, some their experiences, and some outlined the legal aspects of voluntary euthanasia. There was a video presentation on the so-called 'Peanut Project' with input from some of the participants. It showed the manufacturing process of a substance, which could be used for a peaceful and gentle death and which can be made by untrained persons working jointly. It is a great experiment and we all hope that it will succeed. Whether one agrees or not with Dr Nitschke's ideas, one has to admit that this will make the politicians and their foot-shuffling irrelevant.

Particular interest was generated by the narrated experiences of Evelyn Martens from Canada and Bill Godfrey from Australia. Both were about the perils and pitfalls of helping someone to commit suicide. Australia and Canada have similar laws regarding assisting in suicide and they are pretty draconian.

While Ms Martens had a very harrowing time, being hounded by the police, Mr Godfrey has nothing but praise for the consideration and politeness shown to his family by the police. Ms Martens was acquitted by a jury of all charges which stemmed from a "sting" operation by the police. Mr Godfrey's brother Dr John Godfrey had pleaded guilty to the charge of assisting his mother to commit suicide and was charged and found guilty. The judge, Justice Underwood of the Tasmanian Supreme Court, showed great understanding and compassion while sentencing John Godfrey to a suspended 12 months

imprisonment. It is a pity that, while politicians dither, it is being left to the courts to take note of the public mood and address society's concerns.

There was a video presentation of a talk by Ludwig Minelli, founder-Director of Dignitas in Switzerland. He explained how his organisation provides assistance to terminally ill patients from all over the world; the functions, principles and practicalities involved. One of these patients was Andries Verschoor, an Australian, whose family was kind enough to talk at the conference. It was uplifting to hear from the daughters that they were glad to help their father in his last wish, and felt privileged to have been able to provide support.

An interesting debate about the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia and self-help never reached its promised level and a lot of questions were left unanswered. Discussions were also held about the role of religion in Australian politics; that of the media in the voluntary euthanasia debate and on the subject of human rights and free speech. Of course the, now infamous, Suicide Related Materials Offences Act got plenty of mention and condemnation. Among the people taking part in the discussions were Senator Lyn Allison, Senator Barnaby Joyce, ex-Senator Brian Greig, Ian Cohen MLC, Terry O'Gorman and Greg Barns. Needless to say, all of the above mentioned were not in favour of voluntary euthanasia, but all professed respect for individual rights and democracy.

My overall feeling was of encouragement and a certain amount of exhilaration at the enthusiasm and conviction so apparent at the conference. I have never had so much joy nor enjoyed so much while talking about death. Who says that death has to be a morbid subject?

Ranjan Ray