

Interview

Is there a need for a third organization in Switzerland to offer assisted voluntary death (AVD) next to Exit and Dignitas?

As for Exit, this organization is available for Swiss citizens only, foreigners are rejected by Exit. With the help of the SPIRIT Foundation I would like to give the possibility of going into an AVD in Switzerland not only to Swiss people, but also terminally ill foreigners, as long as the AVD is illegal in their home country and their only way out is to come to Switzerland.

As for Dignitas, as a consultant doctor of Dignitas I did not have the possibility to participate actively in the endeavour to promote self-determination at the end of life. As I do not want to subordinate to the conditions of Dignitas any more, I continue to work in my own way with the newly formed foundation.

A second organization, that enables foreigners to make use of their human rights for a safe AVD in Switzerland, brings new life into the discussion about self-determination at the end of life here and abroad.

Why did you found an association and a foundation?

In the association lifecircle I wish to support life, in leading the members primarily to stand up for everything that preserves life. Through lifecircle suicide prevention will be practiced. lifecircle shall improve the quality of life. Palliative care and care at home are to be supported, and a Living will-document is available which corresponds to the new Swiss law for adults starting in 2013.

The Spirit Foundation takes care of the realization of AVD (assisted voluntary death), and of the legalization of AVD in other countries. If someone wants to apply for an AVD, he should first become a member of lifecircle. If it is clear that quality of life cannot be improved by any means, he/she can without delay apply for an AVD to the Spirit Foundation.

How do you ensure that nobody goes into an AVD frivolously?

A request for AVD is analyzed by the board. The board checks whether all necessary conditions for an AVD are fulfilled and whether all the necessary documents are existing. If so, the documents will be handed over to a Swiss doctor. The doctor verifies if from the medical and ethical point of view an AVD is reasonable and then might give the "provisional green light".

What does the "provisional green light" mean?

By this the doctor confirms that he can imagine on the basis of written documents, that the death wish could be justified. With the green light he acknowledges his willingness to hold two meetings with the member, which take place in Switzerland. There must be at least two days in between those meetings. After these two interviews and an examination, the Swiss doctor will decide, whether he can provide the prescription for NAP.

What does NAP mean and how does it work?

NAP is a sodium pentobarbital, a barbiturate, which was used many years ago as a sleeping aid, but now is only available for AVD's. The overdose of NAP used, lets the person concerned fall into a deep coma-like sleep and leads to a complete relaxation of all muscles. Thus, also the respiratory muscles are relaxed, causing death due to oxygen deficiency. The person concerned is not aware that they are dying because they are in a narcotic-like deep sleep.

Are there also problems or disadvantages with NAP?

NAP is a powder that is dissolved in water. To avoid vomiting because of NAP, the person concerned must first drink a high dose of an anti-emetic. When NAP is swallowed, this is hard, because it tastes very bitter. Some people also say that they feel a burning sensation in the stomach. The bitter taste and burning can be neutralized with chocolate or yogurt well and quickly. If NAP is applied by infusion, it acts much faster and triggers neither bitterness nor burning sensation. As long as accepted by the Swiss law, I will apply NAP only intravenously to my terminal patients, because I am aware that they have suffered extensively and should not have to swallow the bitter drink additional to their suffering.

What is the procedure of an AVD by infusion?

An intravenous needle has to be inserted, then this is connected with an infusion bag of saline water. After that we practice with the person concerned, the opening and closing of the valve. Once the person has completely understood this, the infusion is closed. Now, the NAP is injected into an infusion bag. Then, only the person concerned is allowed to operate the infusion valve. He/she can open the infusion personally, when desired, but he/she must have understood that death will follow immediately when the valve is opened.

Is it true that every AVD must be filmed?

There is no mandatory requirement that the AVD must be filmed. But the filming is the only way to prove that the person actually took the drink him- or herself or has personally opened the valve of the infusion. By recording all questions of the accompanying person and also all answers of the person concerned, there is proof that this person was aware of taking in a deadly substance.

What does an AVD cost?

There are different costs for Swiss citizens and foreigners. Swiss citizens pay 3000 francs for an AVD. This fee includes costs for assessment by the Board, the cost of doctor consultations, as well as all direct and indirect costs for the accompaniment. Funeral expenses are not included.

Foreigners pay for the issuing of the provisional green light 3000 francs. Included here is the entire effort until all documents are available, the assessment by the Board, and the compensation of the physician to issue the green light. Once a date is agreed for the talks in Switzerland, the person concerned pays another 7000 francs. These are to cover the two medical interviews and one examination, all direct and indirect costs for the AVD, as well as all costs incurred by the funeral service, cremation and transferring the urn.

Any surplus will exclusively benefit the foundation and is used according to the foundation's statute.

Why are the costs so high for foreigners?

The total costs are much higher for foreigners, because the investigations are complex and it takes much more time and effort to acquire the documents. There also arise costs by funeral services etc. Any surpluses that are not depleted by the expenses are used according to the foundation's laws, for organizations that promote self-determination, suicide prevention and palliative care.

Why did you set up an association and a foundation?

It is important to me that also people, who do not want to go into an AVD, become a member of *lifecircle*, fill in a Living will and contribute to the improvement of life quality. *Lifecircle's* deliberate intention is to affirm life, but with SPIRIT even the kind of self-determination can be perceived, which may end with an AVD. At the same time the funds, which remain (through an AVD) in the SPIRIT Foundation, will support *lifecircle* etc. and with this they will support life. Thus arises between life and death, between *lifecircle* and SPIRIT, a cycle that is ultimately promoting self-determination and quality of life.

Can doctors who prescribe NAP, decide between life and death?

No. The doctors, who consider people for Spirit, have strict criteria for the issuing of the NAP's prescription. It is considered whether the person is really suffering from an incurable disease and all forms of therapy have been applied. They also keep as far as possible to the guidelines of the Ethics Commission of Switzerland and the guidelines of the Swiss Agency for Medical Sciences (SAMW). Ultimately, however, all human beings have the right to end their life. Only the person concerned him/herself can judge whether this life is worth living or not. But if a doctor ethically cannot accept a wish to die, he will not issue the prescription.

Does SPIRIT also accompany mentally ill people?

As the evaluation of mentally ill persons needs special and very complicated investigations, SPIRIT is currently not able to accompany mentally ill persons.

How are the foundation's funds distributed?

Funds are always being distributed according to the bylaws. The board decides which organizations will be considered. Depending on the amount that is available, this will be considered primarily for the association *lifecircle*, associated with the Foundation, secondarily other organizations that are in agreement with the purpose of the foundation.

Can Organizations seek funding by SPIRIT?

Organizations, that fulfill the purpose of the foundation, can apply for assistance. For that purpose a form will be available at a later date on this website.

Do you campaign for members?

Yes, we get in touch with all "Right-to-the-Societies" in the world. They numbered more than fifty by 2011. This way, people with the desire for self-determination are made aware of *lifecircle* and Spirit. *lifecircle* will not actively campaign in Switzerland for members, however, it will make itself known by public work and so invite people to join the association.

Do you feel that you are competing with EXIT?

No, rather as a supplement. Since Exit accompanies no foreigners, Spirit does not enter into competition with Exit. In the assistance to Swiss citizens, Exit will always retain a leading role, as Exit numbered almost 60'000 members in 2011 and is best known and accepted in Switzerland. The goal should not be a competition, but a synergy, as both organizations have self-determination as their goal. I could even imagine a degree of cooperation between Exit and *lifecircle*.

Will your attendants work as volunteers?

No, they will be adequately paid for their services like any other working person. Like a midwife does, the attendants who help with AVD, should receive a salary for their time spent. People who work for AVD of other organizations receive a reimbursement of expenses per assistance of at least 500 Swiss francs. I am convinced that a taxable compensation according to the time issued and just a small reimbursement of expenses is more reasonable.

What kind of public work will *lifecircle* fulfill?

We will be on hand to make informative meetings about the Living will and the new Swiss adult law, if possible events in collaboration with palliative care staff. Regarding options of care for severe incurable diseases, we will offer advice according to the relief of persons who are nursing their relatives at home. We also will give information about contact points in case of danger of suicide, and be of help ourselves by providing an open discussion without the risk of involuntary arrest in a psychiatric ward.

How will you finance your organizations activities?

We hope that members will work as volunteers for the association. And we hope that individual members also support our ideas and endeavors through donations. In addition, some support will come from the Spirit Foundation.