

Mother of Dutch euthanasia law is found dead

The Netherlands

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The Dutch woman who pushed through the world's first euthanasia law has been found dead in mysterious circumstances in the garage at her home.

Els Borst, 81, died as a result of either an accident or a crime, police in Utrecht said, in a statement which ruled out natural causes. As Health Minister, she drafted the law in 2002 permitting euthanasia and assisted suicide under strict conditions. It has been used by several thousands of people a year.

The veteran politician, a former dep-

uty prime minister, was said to have been well and in good spirits at her last public appearance, a party function on Saturday, and not suffering from any ailments.

A friend discovered her body on Monday evening and an initial forensic investigation was inconclusive, leading police to order a post-mortem examination to discover how she died. Her house in Bilthoven, a suburb of Utrecht, was cordoned off yesterday.

Ms Borst, right, who trained and worked as a medical scientist before entering politics for the small D66 liberal party, pioneered several controversial measures during her career, includ-

ing the right to euthanasia and the use of foetal tissue from abortions or miscarriages in medical research.

She was among the foremost women in Dutch politics, serving as health minister from 1994 to 2002 in the two governments of Wim Kok.

After retiring from frontline politics she was awarded the title minister of state, which is given to a select band of Dutch public figures, along with a diplomatic passport, to represent the country internationally.

The Netherlands' euthanasia law, which codified longstanding practice, allows euthanasia when a terminally ill person requests it, is suffering unbear-

ably and has no chance of recovery. Two doctors must agree on the diagnosis before any action is taken.

Ms Borst defended the policy as humane, despite protests and criticism from religious groups. "I hope that other governments will find the courage to follow suit," she said in 2001, after the lower house of parliament approved the law.

While trying to prevent a measles epidemic in the Dutch Calvinist bible belt last year, she wrote a newspaper opinion piece asking clergymen and churchgoers to get vaccinated. "If everything is God's

will, then so is the invention of the vaccine, just like the seatbelt," she wrote. In another interview, Ms Borst acknowledged that she was not opposed, in principle, to a suicide pill for "very aged people who are finished with life. We have to have a thorough societal discussion of this subject".

Mark Rutte, the Prime Minister, paid tribute to Ms Borst, describing her as "a wise professional, with clear and considered standpoints, who stood her ground".

He added: "She won people over with her openness, mildness and honesty."

