

# Dutch doctors resist euthanasia campaign call for suicide pills

Netherlands

Bruno Waterfield

Doctors are resisting calls from euthanasia campaigners in the Netherlands for "last wish" suicide pills to be made available to all elderly people.

Medically assisted killing has been legal in the Netherlands for almost 14 years and growing numbers of people are choosing to end their lives. The Dutch Society for a Voluntary End Of Life is now campaigning for suicide pills to become available automatically to everybody over 70 on the basis of a request to a doctor or pharmacist.

Doctors are concerned that medical-assisted killing is increasingly seen as a consumer right and they fear that the campaign will create "an obligation for the doctor to co-operate" on demand, leading to abuse of euthanasia or an acceptance that it is the most appropriate social response to old age.

In 2014, 5,306 Dutch people, including patients who were 41 mentally ill, persuaded their doctors to administer lethal doses of drugs to end their lives because of "unbearable" pain. The figure was 10 per cent higher than the previous year.

If Britain had the same laws as the Netherlands and used euthanasia on the same per capita basis it would mean more than 20,200 people medically killed every year.

Rutger Jan van der Gaag, the chairman of the Dutch medical association

told the *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper: "Euthanasia is just one of the options, there must be room for consideration. Do we want the government to allow an end-of-life pill being available to everyone? How do we protect the vulnerable against pressure?"

"The doctor is now at least an important safety valve which ensures that reasonable alternatives cannot be overlooked and euthanasia resources are not misused. With doctors as the central professional it never becomes 'You ask, we inject'."

Should suicide pills become available on request, the only safeguard against abuse or murder would be the prescription by a doctor or pharmacist, who would check the person's age.

"We see that society wants such a pill, particularly among the baby-boom generation which is not afraid to speak its mind," said Robert Schurink, the director of the voluntary end of life society. "They want control over the end of their lives."

Research by the Dutch medical association has found that GPs face "great social pressure" to perform euthanasia.

Eric Cremers, a GP working in Tegelen, a village in the Limburg region, has experienced elderly people refusing to take no for an answer. "A 'no' from the doctor does not seem to be accepted," he told *NRC*. "I call this the bol.com mentality [after a popular internet shopping site] — order today, tomorrow it is at home."

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