

Dignitas founder in court accused of profiteering

Assisted suicide law in test case as lawyers argue over the meaning of taking a life for 'self-serving motives'

By Justin Huggler in Berlin

THE founder of Dignitas, Switzerland's best known assisted suicide organisation, went on trial yesterday charged with profiteering from patients and exploiting them for his own benefit.

Ludwig Minelli was said to have arranged the assisted suicide of a German woman after she left the organisation £74,000 in her will, and to have overcharged a mother and daughter £8,000 to arrange their joint suicide. Mr Minelli denied the charges, telling the court they were "inconsistent and absurd".

Assisted suicide is permitted in Switzerland but it is illegal to encourage or help someone take their own life for "self-serving motives". This is considered to include charging more than the

standard rate. It is the first time the laws have been tested in court.

Dignitas campaigns to change the law on euthanasia in other countries, including Britain. Earlier this month it accused MPs of "ignorance, irresponsibility and hypocrisy" for refusing to legalise assisted suicide in the UK.

Dignitas does not conduct assisted suicides itself, but arranges for independent Swiss doctors to provide them for its clients.

Mr Minelli, 85, is charged with arranging the suicide of an 80-year-old

German woman in 2003 despite the fact three Swiss doctors had refused to carry it out on ethical grounds.

Although the woman was distressed, she was not terminally ill, prosecutors maintained. Mr Minelli found a fourth doctor who was prepared to prescribe a lethal dose.

Prosecutors alleged Mr Minelli stood to gain from her death as she had left Dignitas 100,000 Swiss francs in her will and added that he had not honoured her request to have her ashes buried beside her husband in Ger-

many, disposing of them instead in Lake Zurich. He is also accused of charging a German mother and daughter 11,000 Swiss francs each to arrange their suicides, twice the normal rate. The mother, 85, and her daughter, 55, only agreed to the excessive charges because they were desperate, prosecutors argued.

Mr Minelli vehemently rejected the charges yesterday. "This is not a normal criminal procedure," he told the court. Prosecutors "simply wanted to put their noses" into Dignitas' business

and had "come up with a pretext", he claimed. Prosecutors' estimates of the standard costs of providing assisted suicide were wrong, he argued. "The people who have come up with these figures don't have the slightest idea of this work," he said.

It comes a week after David Goodall, the British-Australian scientist, travelled to Switzerland to end his life at the age of 104. He used the services of Life Cycle, a rival clinic, which is not accused of any wrongdoing.

The trial of Mr Minelli continues.