

Not euthanasia – but a fatal run-in with red tape

Holland has been shaken by the death of a young writer who starved herself to death after being failed by the system

Peter Conradi Europe Editor

A psychologist who treated Noa Pothoven, the 17-year-old Dutch girl who died last weekend after refusing food and water, has warned that there could be “250 Noas” across Holland because of the failure of its decentralised care services to cope with patients who have complex mental health problems.

The claim, by Peer van der Helm, a lecturer in residential youth care who said he had intensive contact with Noa over four months, echoes the teenager’s account of her often desperate attempts to receive help in an award-winning book, *Winnen of Leren* (Winning or Learning), published last year.

Noa’s case became front-page news across the world last week after initial reports erroneously claimed that she had been helped to die under a Dutch law that allows euthanasia and assisted dying. In fact, Noa, who had been suffering for several years from depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and anorexia, took her own life by stopping eating and drinking. A Dutch “end of life clinic” had turned her away as too young.

The teenager reportedly died in the early hours of last Sunday in the family home in Arnhem under the supervision of a medical team. The clamour over the misreporting of her death has obscured unease about the way she died. The inability of those looking after her to dissuade her from her intention to kill herself has raised uncomfortable questions about her mental health treatment.

Van der Helm, who lectures at Leiden University of Applied Sciences, apportioned part of the blame to the state of youth and mental health care in Holland. He argued that decentralisation had left local authorities without the expertise or resources to treat those, such as Noa, who suffered from an interlinked series of problems, costing as much as €1m (£870,000) a year per patient. “Which



municipality can pay for that,” he wrote in a column in the NRC Handelsblad newspaper. “What can we do to give the approximately 250 Noas the right care and treatment every year?”

Van der Helm’s concerns were echoed by Lisa Westerveld, a Dutch Green-Left MP, who said she had visited Noa every

Noa Pothoven died after she was turned away by a euthanasia clinic as too young

few weeks, most recently on the Friday before her death.

During a debate in the Dutch parliament, Westerveld said she had promised the teenager to continue her fight for better youth care – which she said would include telling Noa's story as well as that of the few hundred other young people "suffering from life".

Noa's mother, Lisette, has also criticised the fragmented youth care system, describing her daughter's experience of the bureaucracy as "maddening".

In her book, Noa wrote that her life had been transformed for the worse after two sexual assaults at parties from the age of 11 and being raped by two men when she was 14. She did not tell her parents, but "after that there was nothing left of my life".

Noa described how, badly underweight, she was admitted to hospital when she was 14, where she was forced, and then treated at a clinic for eating disorders. In total she was seen at almost two dozen institutions, sometimes having had to wait months for specialised treatment.

Often, she wrote, she had been accused by counsellors of play-acting and selfishness. In one institution, after cutting herself for the umpteenth time and asking for help by intercom from the room in which she was being held, she had been told: "I don't have time for your nonsense. You are overreacting. You figure it out."

Despairing, Noa, then aged 16, approached the Levensende (end of life) clinic in The Hague, 75 miles from her home, to inquire about euthanasia, but her request was rejected.

"They are of the opinion that I am too young to die," she told her local newspaper. "They believe I need to receive trauma-focused treatment first and wait until my brain is fully developed. That won't happen until I am 21. I am devastated because I cannot wait that long."

In a last Instagram post, a few days before her death, she wrote: "Within a maximum of 10 days I will die. After years of battling and fighting, I am drained. I have quit eating and drinking for a while now, and after many discussions and evaluations, it was decided to let me go because my suffering is unbearable."

@Peter_Conradi