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Suicide Pills

The reluctance of elected parliaments to enact or even debate any form of voluntary euthanasia legislation has led to consideration of other ways of helping those who want the option of a quick peaceful death at a time of their choosing. One of these ways is to develop a DIY (do-it-yourself) "suicide pill" with rather special characteristics:

- Freely available from readily available ingredients so that it cannot be policed or controlled.
- Able to induce a gentle, peaceful death irrespective of the underlying medical condition. Medical attendance or other supervision not needed.

Such a pill does not exist at present but it is understood that research in that direction is in hand. Most voluntary euthanasia societies, including SAVES, are uneasy about the development of a DIY suicide pill. Such a pill would increase the number of irrational suicides, particularly among the young.

SAVES takes the view that doctors have a duty of care in the complexities of dying just as in the complexities of being born. We do not believe that a DIY suicide pill is an adequate substitute for enlightened medical care at the end of life. Our stated aims for law reform require the direct involvement of a medical practitioner acting in accord with medical judgement and conscience in response to a current (or advance) request from a patient.

Others have thought of suicide pills. For example, in the Netherlands in 1991, Supreme Court Judge Huib Drion proposed that the elderly should have access to the means to end their life in an acceptable manner at a time of their choosing. He felt that the elderly as a group would include people who would arrive at the clear position at some point, "I definitely do not want whatever life I have left". This position, he argued, deserved respect.

Seven years later the Drion Pill, as it became known, is still no more than a concept. In the Netherlands the availability of voluntary euthanasia is tied to the release from "unbearable suffering" although it is true that emotional suffering may be included. Merely being ready to die is not enough.

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