

Zurich hosts dignity in death debate

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Groups supporting the right to hasten dying will meet in Zurich this week for a global conference on assisted suicide, reigniting the debate on dignified death.

Representatives from about 45 countries are expected at the five-day congress of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies, held every two years.

The venue of the 2012 meeting honours the 30th anniversary of Zurich-based Exit, a group carrying out assisted suicides in Switzerland where the practice is legal under certain conditions.

"It's no longer necessary to make the argument in Switzerland," said Exit vice president Bernhard Sutter.

"Lots of people are nevertheless interested in the subject and are asking, for example, what will happen the day they suffer from Alzheimer's," he said.

The [conference](#) will hear from acclaimed British fantasy author Sir Terry Pratchett, himself diagnosed with Alzheimer's several years ago and patron of pro-choice group Dignity in Dying.

Pratchett will address the conference during its open day on Friday along with Ludwig Minelli, founder of Swiss [assisted suicide](#) group Dignitas, and German writer Ueli Oswald whose father died with Exit.

The meeting is otherwise reserved for members of the Federation.

"The situation concerning assisted suicide varies widely from country to country," said Sutter.

"The aim of the conference is essentially an exchange between the participants on political work, lobbying and initiatives" to make the argument for assisted suicide, he said.

The congress, last held in Melbourne in 2010, will also see the detractors of assisted dying have their say.

Human Life International (HLI) Switzerland, which campaigns on abortion, contraception, [sex education](#) and [euthanasia](#), plans to hold a demonstration on the fringes of the forum on Friday.

"Our aim is not to disrupt the conference," said secretary Christoph Keel.

"Our aim is to put other arguments to the visitors of the congress. We are going to organise discussions and we will be there at the entrance (of the conference) to distribute leaflets," he said.

Sutter from Exit says he is "completely accepting" of different views.

"It's just a shame that the opposite camp is not tolerant too," he said.

Three hundred Swiss residents died in assisted suicides in 2009, nine out of 10 of them aged over 55, according to official statistics published for the first time in March this year.

The Swiss Federal Statistics Office data does not take into account foreigners who come to Switzerland for assisted suicide.

Between 1998 and 2011, Dignitas helped 1,169 non-nationals die, mostly Germans (664), followed by patients from Britain (182) and France (117).

Exit meanwhile stipulates that clients must be resident in Switzerland.

Swiss law says a person may be given "passive" or "indirect active" assistance to suicide, such as being supplied with a lethal dose of a drug, provided it is not done for selfish motives or for gain.

The government last year rejected proposals to tighten the rules.

Politicians had considered imposing certain "duties of care" to employees of organisations offering assisted suicide and an outright ban on the groups altogether.

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