



Suicide bags in Australia

1 Introduction

Euthanasia and assisted suicide are illegal in Australia. Pro-euthanasia groups have recently resorted to supporting high-profile suicides in the media (e.g. Nancy Crick) and civil disobedience. The 'Exit bag' is a new strategy demonstrating defiance against the law.

2 How politicians have responded

The euthanasia lobby group Exit has announced plans to import 'exit bags', used to commit suicide.¹ The Federal police have stated that the bags cannot be banned, however it is clear that many politicians are not happy to allow supply of the bags to Australians. Justice and Customs Minister Chris Ellison has warned that those importing the bags can be prosecuted for aiding and abetting someone's death.²

3 Ethical analysis

Dr Philip Nitschke explains that the 'Exit bag' provides a peaceful death, and claims that banning the bags would be akin to banning other common items which could be used for suicide, like rope.³

Australian politicians clearly understand that Exit is taking such steps to pressure the government to legalise euthanasia. Despite the potential difficulty in banning such devices, politicians appear to be concerned enough to try. Australia has a high rate of youth suicide, particularly among young men, and governments continue to invest funds in suicide prevention programs.

While euthanasia activists claim that they do not advocate suicide for youth, the philosophical basis of their arguments suggests otherwise. The euthanasia movement upholds the supreme importance of 'quality of life', suggesting that when it is absent or even deficient, suicide or euthanasia are justified. And since quality of life is extremely poor when afflicted with depression, the euthanasia movement is in effect dangling a dangerous carrot before extremely vulnerable people. It should come as no surprise that the source of most suicide attempts is depression. Furthermore, whether depression negates autonomous decision-making is contentious among euthanasia advocates, even though it would be hard to argue that at the very least it is not severely compromised.

¹ Greg Roberts, "Nitschke skirts law with suicide bag" *The Age*, Melbourne, 21/08/2002

² "Government moves to ban 'suicide bags'", ABC news online, Wednesday 21st August

³ Greg Roberts, "Nitschke skirts law with suicide bag" *The Age*, Melbourne, 21/08/2002