

# **Australian Guide to Dignitas**

With particular reference to  
**Queensland**

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Much of the material in this guide has been reproduced from the  
*"UK Guide to Dignitas"* January, 2006, written by  
FATE (Friends At The End), Glasgow, Scotland, and updated by Ludwig Minelli, Director,  
Dignitas.

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## Introduction

The association “*DIGNITAS – To live with dignity – to die with dignity*” was founded on 17 May 1998 at Forch (Zurich), Switzerland. It pursues no commercial interests whatsoever and has the objectives of ensuring a life and a death with dignity for its members, and of allowing other persons to benefit from these values. Dignitas is the only organisation in the world which offers a doctor-assisted suicide service to people from other countries, enabling them to die with dignity and comfort, despite having to travel to Zurich to do so.

Swiss law, unlike the state and territory laws in Australia\*, permits a doctor, if specific conditions are met, to write a prescription for a lethal dose of a barbiturate. In order to comply with Swiss law, various documents are required. Acquiring these and going through the necessary procedures can take time and sometimes be difficult.

The object of this guide is to assist people to complete the formalities, alert them to the length of time that may be needed, indicate the cost, and describe procedures upon reaching Zurich so that people know what to expect.

*\* In the Northern Territory, Marshall Perron’s Bill, the Rights of the Terminally Ill Act (ROTI) came into effect on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1996, the world’s first VE law. The Federal Government subsequently reversed the changes in the Northern Territory in 1997. Four persons chose to use the Act to end their lives peacefully and with dignity during the brief period the law was in effect. Hopes abound that when the Northern Territory becomes a State, the issue will be re-visited.*

## Joining Dignitas

Anyone over 18 can join, whether they intend asking for help immediately or wish to have an ‘insurance policy’ for the future. Contact Dignitas for an application form:

*Write:* Dignitas, POB 9, CH-8127, FORCH, Switzerland

*Tel:* +41 44 980 44 59      *Fax:* +41 44 980 1421

*E-mail:* [dignitas@dignitas.ch](mailto:dignitas@dignitas.ch)      *Web:* [www.dignitas.ch](http://www.dignitas.ch)

Once you have joined, Dignitas responds by sending you information about the organization, a Patient Instruction form, and payment details. When this is completed satisfactorily, Dignitas will send you four identical, passport-sized membership documents.

Should you wish to ask for help immediately, include a letter telling Dignitas something of your circumstances, your medical condition and your prognosis. In order to accelerate the procedure, Dignitas also needs a brief description of yourself and two medical reports (see page 6 & 7).

## Who can be helped to die

Dignitas must keep strictly to Swiss law. They cannot help people whose condition may improve either by itself or with treatment. They accept those who are terminally ill or suffering unbearably from symptoms that cannot be relieved.

As of February 2006 Dignitas has helped 493 individuals to act upon their choice to die, more than half of them from Germany and Britain. To date, at least five people in Australia have availed themselves of this help.

## What Dignitas requires

If Dignitas can consider your application for immediate help, they will ask you for the following:

1. *Short self description and personal view* of the suffering you are experiencing.

This should include factual details (date of birth and so on) as well as the views of your family members. Do they support your intention? Will someone go with you to Zurich – a family member or a friend? (Dignitas's help is not conditional on the family's agreement, but naturally they wish to avoid problems from relatives.)

2. *Medical Reports*

Two or more are required, normally from two different doctors, but in exceptional cases one may be accepted. At least one must be dated within the last four months.

The reports should include:

- Diagnosis
- State of health
- Prognosis (if available)
- Treatment
- Current medication

The medical reports are given to a Swiss doctor. If s/he agrees that your condition justifies the ending of your life and your documents are in order (see page 7), Dignitas will send you a letter giving you a 'provisional green light' and telling you the costs and procedures.

*Note:* In Queensland you have a legal right to obtain a copy of your medical records without giving a reason. If you have a good relationship with your doctor, you can be frank about why you need your records, but unless you are absolutely sure, it may be best not reveal your intentions.

If you request these records from a private practitioner, your doctor is legally allowed to withhold details prior to 2002. There will probably be a charge for these records.

To obtain your records from a hospital you need to ask the *Freedom of Information Officer*. There should be no charge for hospital records.

### 3. Documents

Everyone is required to provide:-

- Passport.
- Proof of residence; e.g. a service bill that includes your address.
- Full birth certificate, including parents' names.

*In addition*, if you are married:-

- Partner's birth certificate, including parents' names.
- Marriage certificate.

*In addition*, if you are divorced or widowed:-

- Divorce certificate or partner's death certificate.

NB: According to Swiss law all Registry Office documents must not be older than six (6) months. Therefore a request for these documents should only be made if you are definite about going to Switzerland and should be timed appropriately.

## Travel arrangements

Once the 'green light' has been given, you can discuss an approximate date with Dignitas. The timing for going to Zurich can be critical and very difficult to arrange. NEVER arrive without notice.

Traveling to Switzerland to end one's life demands strength of purpose and determination. The journey from Australia is long and arduous, especially for someone terminally ill and/or suffering unrelenting pain. The person accompanying the patient must also be focused and strong willed. Practical difficulties may arise and need to be sorted out quickly. Throughout, the welfare of the patient must come first. A sense of humour in both parties is a great help!

Flights from Australia to Zurich are via Singapore or Hong Kong. Total flying time is at least 22 hours and there is additional change-over time as well. A stop-over of at least a day in Singapore or Hong Kong is highly recommended.

All travel arrangements can be made through a travel agent or via the Internet. Return air fare will possibly be cheaper than one way.

## Official data sheet for the Zurich authorities

Before you leave Australia to come to Zurich, you will need to complete and return a data sheet (sent to you by Dignitas) for the Swiss authorities.

## **On arrival in Zurich**

There are always two appointments required when you reach Zurich: The first, at the doctor's room to meet the doctor who is going to prescribe the barbiturate; the second, at the apartment for the final 'accompaniment', as the assisted dying process is called by Dignitas. Although the choice is up to you, the two visits are preferred on consecutive days, partly to ensure that there is the time and opportunity to change your mind.

Once you arrive in Zurich, take a taxi to the Dignitas office in Forch or to the doctor's consulting room, as advised by Dignitas. If you will need an ambulance, notify Dignitas in advance and it will be arranged for you. The ambulance comes up to the plane and the stretcher is fork-lifted directly into it. (Note – this will involve an extra cost.) According to reports, all goes as smoothly as a Swiss watch and their paramedics are superb!

## **Meeting the doctor**

You will meet the doctor, who will have your medical reports in his/her rooms in the Zurich area. S/he needs to determine that you are quite certain that you wish to die and that you can swallow the drink unaided or that means are available for the drug to be administered by yourself. S/he will answer any questions you wish to ask.

If you have elected to have the two appointments in one day, you will then have a 30-40 minute drive central Zurich.

## **The Final Procedure**

You will be directed to a place where two trained volunteers will assist you with the final arrangements and offer you coffee or tea. There you must sign three documents which are needed by the Swiss authorities. The volunteer goes through these with you. One of these is a Power of Attorney to the Director of Dignitas to enable him to handle your case with the local authority. This is a carefully drafted legal document but has no effect on your rights or estate.

The 'accompaniment' is then described in detail. You must first take an anti-emetic solution (pleasant taste), followed 30 minutes later by the bitter tasting lethal barbiturate preparation – both about an average sherry glassful in volume. The volunteer is kind and thoughtful, and everything is done at the pace you wish. For example, if you wish to spend time with the people who have come with you, the volunteer will wait outside.

When you are ready you can sit on a chair or lie on the bed. The barbiturate should be drunk quickly but, even if you do not drain the glass, the dose will be fatal. You may have help holding the glass or the straw, but you must swallow it unaided. For those who cannot swallow arrangements are made so that you can trigger the self-administration of the drug by injection through a stomach tube or with the help of an electric infusion apparatus. You go to sleep within 1-2 minutes and die 20-30 minutes later. There is a video camera at the end of the bed to provide proof that

you were not helped. Two witnesses are required, one of whom must be the volunteer.

## **The Swiss authorities**

The person who came with you is expected to stay to see the authorities, especially for the purpose of the identification of the deceased person. As soon as you have died, the volunteer phones the local police station to report what has happened. Officials come from the police and the Prosecutor's office, and there is also an official doctor. (They may be delayed for up to 2 hours if they have other urgent demands on their time.)

Dignitas will send your death certificate to whomever you requested to receive it. Your ashes will also be sent as soon as possible but this may not be for up to 10 days later.

## **Arrangements for the body**

Ensure that you tell Dignitas the:

- Name of person to whom the death certificate is to be sent
- Name of person to whom ashes are to be sent

If you wish the body to be sent back, the arrangements must be made in advance in Australia.

## **Legal position as of 2008**

It is not illegal to travel to Switzerland in order to have an assisted death. To date no one has been prosecuted for accompanying a person, but this has not so far been tested in law. Dignitas has noted that judicial authorities in countries with laws which are similar to British law would have to ask for a lot of evidence from Swiss authorities. However, as assisting suicide in Switzerland is legal, there is no way for Swiss authorities to force somebody to give evidence. This can be seen as the biggest obstacle for criminal prosecution in Australia.

In 2006 a British man, who accompanied his mother to Zurich, was questioned by the authorities upon his return to England, but no charges were laid.

## **An Australian Story**

Gold Coast man, Andries Verschoor chose the "Swiss Option" because he had a very aggressive cancer of a salivary gland, which resulted in destructive surgery, and no hope of cure. He said while he did not choose to die, he could choose the time and manner of his dying.

Two of his daughters accompanied him to Zurich with a two-day stopover in Singapore. They said there was quite a lot of paperwork required and that the timing for going to Zurich was very difficult and critical: Their father had to get there before he could no longer swallow and/or need a tracheotomy to breathe.

In describing their father's death one of the daughters said, "He just sat on the bed and sipped about an eggcup full of clear liquid... A minute later he said he didn't think the drug was working but within seconds began to yawn and said he felt tired... He just fell asleep. He was very peaceful and asleep. We sat with dad until he died."

Andries' daughters had only praise for the whole process, their welcome, counselling, etc. Any wishes they had for a funeral and disposal of the body were met without difficulty. The ashes were sent by post back to Australia. After the death, a doctor was called. He notified the police. A police doctor and the police prosecutor came. This is the normal procedure. As confirmation that all was above board, a video was taken of the counselling process and of their father swallowing the Nembutal.

They had obtained a return ticket for their father and on return the travel agent refunded the airport taxes!

## Summary of expenses

**Please note that this information and the costs to Dignitas are accurate as at December 2008.** However conversion costs to Australian dollars vary on a regular basis as do air fares and accommodation.

### 1) Dignitas Costs

#### Dignitas membership:

	<i>Swiss Franks CHF</i>	<i>Australian \$ AUD</i>
Joining fee	200	260.00
Annual membership	80	104.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>280</b>	<b>364.00</b>

#### In advance of assisted suicide:

	<i>Swiss Frank CHF</i>	<i>Australian \$ AUD</i>
Preparation contribution	3000	3885
Doctor's consultation	500	648
Completion of assisted suicide	3000	3885
Administration	1500	1945
Funeral director & cremation	2000	2593
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>10,000</b>	<b>12,956</b>



Dignitas prefers to be paid in advance through international bank transfer or the Internet based system, Paypal which incurs an additional 5% fee. Dignitas cannot accept credit cards. Cheques also incur a conversion fee of about \$35 - \$40.

## **2) Other costs\***

### **a. Personal expenses for travel and accommodation**

- *Travel expenses* for yourself to Zurich.
- *Return travel expenses* for your escort. (Return economy air fare from Brisbane is approx \$1700 - \$2400)
- *Stopover accommodation* in Singapore or Hong Kong.
- Cost of *transport* from your home to the airport.
- Cost of *transport* from Zurich airport to Dignitas.
- *Accommodation* in Zurich for yourself and your escort.

### **b. Fees associated with obtaining copies of records and documents**

- Medical Reports from two doctors.
- Passport.
- Birth certificate.
- Spouse's birth certificate (if relevant).
- Marriage certificate (if relevant).
- Death certificate (if relevant).
- Divorce certificate (if relevant).

\*Note: As these expenses would vary considerably depending on personal needs we have not attempted to specify costs.

One of our members has written a useful and humorous booklet to guide you through matters to remember during end-of-life planning.

Bequeath the Python  
by Elaine Arch-Rowe & Gordon Bell  
can be ordered from:  
Exit International,  
PO Box 37781,  
DARWIN, Northern Territory 0821.

(A\$15 includes postage within Australia)

*The Voluntary Euthanasia Society of Queensland supports legislation which enables terminally or incurably ill people to choose a painless and dignified death.*

*For more information or for a brochure and membership form:*

*Phone: 1300 733 818,*

*Email: [dwdq@dwdq.org.au](mailto:dwdq@dwdq.org.au)*

*Write: The Secretary,  
P O Box 432,  
SHERWOOD Qld 4075*

*Website: [www.dwdq.org.au](http://www.dwdq.org.au)*