

## 3

# What is a Peaceful Pill?

### Introduction

*The Peaceful Pill is a pill or drink that provides a peaceful, pain-free death at a time of a person's individual choosing; a pill that is orally ingested and available to 'most' people.*

Dr Philip Nitschke

It was the late Dutch Supreme Court Judge Huib Drion who first called for the introduction of a Pill. In an opinion editorial in the prominent Dutch newspaper, *NRC/Handelsblad*, Drion openly bemoaned the fact that while his doctor friends knew what to do and how to access the right drugs for a peaceful death, as a lawyer he did not.

Drion questioned the logic of why he, a retired judge, should not have the same ready access to a dignified death as his doctor friends. According to Drion, all people over a certain age should have the right to die at a time of their choosing. A pill, he argued, would confer this right.

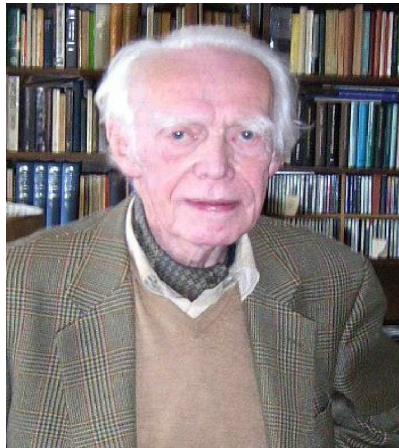


Fig 3.1: Professor Huib Drion

## *What is a “Peaceful Pill”*

Elderly and ailing people often realize that, at some time in the future, they could well find themselves in an unacceptable and unbearable situation, one that is worsening. A pill to end life at one’s own discretion could alleviate some of their anxiety. Not a pill for now, but for the unforeseeable future so that the end can be humane (Huib Drion, Dijkers cited in Nitschke and Stewart, 2005)

Following Drion, Exit research has confirmed that a Peaceful Pill provides peace of mind for its seriously ill or elderly owner, giving that person a sense of control over their life and death. Unlike end of life laws that depend solely upon a person’s state of health (or illness), Drion’s ‘universal model’ has only one criteria, that of age.

Drion suggested that *all* people over the age of 65 years should have access to a Pill. While the age is arguable, the point remains the same. The ‘Drion Pill’ or ‘Peaceful Pill’ should be accessible to the seriously ill *as well as* the elderly.

## **The History of the Suicide Pill**

The idea of a Peaceful Pill – that is, a lethal substance or liquid that can be orally ingested – is not new. In Athenian times, the herb Hemlock was the drug of choice for suicide and it was taken as a drink. The most famous Hemlock suicide was that of the Greek critical scholar, Socrates.

In more modern times, the chemical compound Cyanide has been widely employed as a suicide pill. One well known death from Cyanide was that of Spanish quadriplegic Ramon Sampedro.

## *The Peaceful Pill eHandbook*

In 1998, Sampedro ended his life by drinking cyanide that had been provided and prepared by his friends. The award-winning 2004 film *The Sea Inside* provides a remarkable account of his life and death.

For much of the 20th Century, cyanide was routinely issued to intelligence agents as part of their job. Hitler's head man in the SS and the Gestapo, Heinrich Himmler, escaped interrogation upon arrest by the British, by swallowing a capsule of cyanide.

Hermann Goering, head of the Luftwaffe, avoided the hangman by taking potassium cyanide the night before the planned execution. Where the purpose is to avoid interrogation and torture, speed of action is essential and cyanide fitted the bill.

### **The Best Peaceful Pill**

Half a century on and it is pentobarbital (Nembutal) that is favoured as an ideal Peaceful Pill. Nembutal is a member of the barbiturate family of drugs that are made from the salts of barbituric acid. These active barbiturate salts have been used medically for many years, mainly as sedatives or sleeping tablets.

In the 1950s, for example, there were more than 20 marketed forms of barbiturate sleeping tablets. Early examples included Veronal, Amytal, Seconal, Soneryl, and, of course, Nembutal. Fifty years ago, Nembutal was a widely prescribed drug, recommended even to help babies sleep, and to calm aching teeth.

## *What is a 'Peaceful Pill'?*

Over the last 30 years the barbiturates have slowly disappeared from the market. The fact that in overdose they caused death, either accidentally or deliberately, and the availability of newer, safer sleeping drugs has led to their decline. Nembutal was removed from most countries' prescribing schedules in the late 1990s.

### **Perceived Benefits of a Peaceful Pill**

While there are any number of ways by which a seriously ill person can end their life, few of these methods meet our criteria of:

- reliable
- peaceful
- dignified.

In most western countries, hanging and gun shot remain the most common methods of suicide.

Yet few people would choose such means if they had any real choice. Most seriously ill or elderly people who are considering death, seek a method that is peaceful, dignified and pain free. Most commonly, this is expressed as, 'I simply want to go to sleep and die in my sleep.'

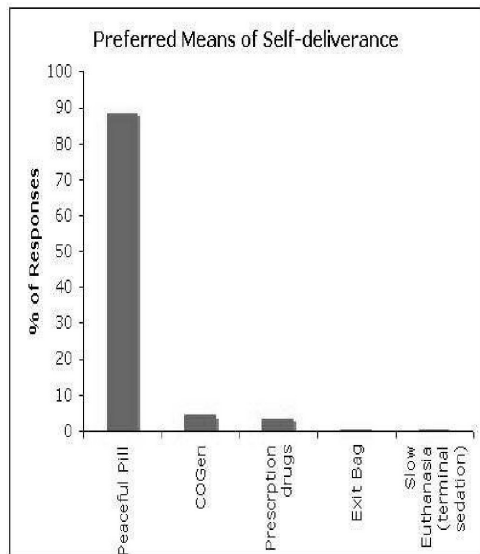


Fig 3.2: Survey of Exit Members  
Methods of Self Deliverance

## *The Peaceful Pill eHandbook*

In 2004, Exit International undertook a major study of our supporters' attitudes to various methods of dignified dying (n=1163). What we found was a strong and significant preference for a Pill over all other methods. Indeed, 89% of respondents (average age 72 years) said that they would prefer to take a Pill than use a plastic Exit bag, a carbon monoxide generator (COGenie) or seek help from a doctor to provide them with 'slow euthanasia.'

A 'Pill' was defined as something that could be taken as a single oral dose (by mouth) in either tablet form or as a small drink.

The reasons behind the respondents' preferences became clear as more of the data set was examined. Most of those surveyed saw the Peaceful Pill as an important way of providing independence (91%). It was seen as an advantage if one did not have to depend on friends and family for assistance when the time came.

A Peaceful Pill was also seen to provide 'peace of mind' (90%), was reliable (88%) and, unlike the Exit Bag or the Carbon Monoxide Generator, the Pill was easy-to-administer (87%) since it required no equipment and no technical know-how.

In this way, the Peaceful Pill was seen as a method that was accessible and usable, even by the most frail.

## *What is a 'Peaceful Pill'?*

### **Conclusion**

Exit's survey revealed a strong preference for a reliable and effective Peaceful Pill.

This was seen as the best means of providing the option of a peaceful death at the time of one's choosing.

The remainder of this book focuses on the various forms a Peaceful Pill might take.

In providing this information we are following the agenda set by long-standing members of Exit International.