



## Pathology Biology Section – 2007

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### **G2 Assisted Suicide as Practiced in the French Part of Switzerland**

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the legal aspects of assisted suicide in Switzerland, where the penal code condones this practice for altruistic reasons, even if not performed by a doctor; the prevalence of this type of death and the way it is treated.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by demonstrating how the number of cases of assisted suicide is growing every year in Switzerland, responding to the requests of very sick patients, when palliative care and other alternatives are not efficient enough anymore.

Assisted suicide is permitted in several countries and jurisdictions: Belgium, the Netherlands, the state of Oregon (USA) and Switzerland. The practice of assisted suicide is controversial leading to debates among doctors, jurists, and ethicists.

In Switzerland, article 115 of the Swiss penal code considers assistance suicide a crime if and only if the motive is for personal gain. It condones assisting suicide for altruistic reasons. This allows associations such as EXIT-ADMD (French Switzerland), EXIT German Switzerland, or DIGNITAS to assist severely ill patients under certain conditions in their desire to end their lives.

This study takes into consideration 200 cases of assisted suicide performed by the association EXIT-ADMD between 2001 and 2005. The districts of Vaud and Geneva were the primary focus of this study, with and the number of cases increasing continually over this time period. Most of the patients were female. The most frequent pathologic conditions were neoplasia, neurological diseases, and cardiovascular diseases. The average age of patients was over 70. More than ¾ of assisted suicides occurred at home; 20 patients died at a nursing home. Due to internal policy restrictions, some of the patients had to leave the hospital or nursing home in which they were staying in order to receive assistance with their suicide.

The most common lethal substance used by patients, when assisted in their suicide, was sodium pentobarbital (between 11 and 15 grams) inducing coma within less than ten minutes, and leading to a painless death within than 30 minutes. At the moment of death, their family or relatives surrounded most patients.

Legal requirements following such a death are quite simple in Geneva. As it is a violent death, the forensic physician must examine the remains, and completes a death certificate noting the unnatural nature of death. Based on these medicolegal observations, the police officer completes a document called the "Nihil Obstat." This permits burial of the remains to take place without any other formality, allowing for full respect of the deceased and his/her family.

**Assisted Suicide, EXIT Association, Switzerland**