

# Death's cocktail

BY DAVID HANCOCK

On a deserted farm in country NSW, a group of elderly people have created the means of their right-to-die, in the face of government attempts to criminalise and marginalise them.

**I**N THE FIRST CASE OF ITS KIND, a group of elderly and terminally ill Australians has manufactured a “peaceful pill” to end their lives. Twenty people gathered at a remote farm in rural NSW last weekend to make a barbiturate-like substance, similar to Nembutal – a drug used in Switzerland, Belgium, the Netherlands and the American state of Oregon, as part of their legal euthanasia programs.

Aged from 55 to 94, all are members of Exit International, a right-to-die organisation operated by voluntary euthanasia advocate Dr Philip Nitschke. Two of the group – who all suffer from emphysema and motor neurone disease – need the drug to end their lives soon, while others want it as insurance against a decline in quality of life or ending up in a nursing home and not being able to look after themselves.

Recently diagnosed with motor neurone disease, Kay, 55, from Victoria, was the youngest. “I have had the experience of watching someone die from a degenerative disease and I did everything possible to keep them going, but their quality of life was just diabolical,” she says.

“I don’t want my husband or kids to look after me or to go into a nursing home. I also worry about implicating others in my death – that is why I am here, so I can do it myself. I feel reassured by having the chemical and don’t feel frightened or scared by it. With it, I can concentrate on my quality of life and will go down laughing.”

Nembutal is considered the holy grail of the voluntary euthanasia movement, because a person who takes a sufficient dose of the drug in a solution of water falls

asleep shortly afterwards and dies peacefully from respiratory failure within 20 minutes. It was the drug used under the world’s first euthanasia legislation, the rights of the terminally ill bill, passed in the Northern Territory in 1995.

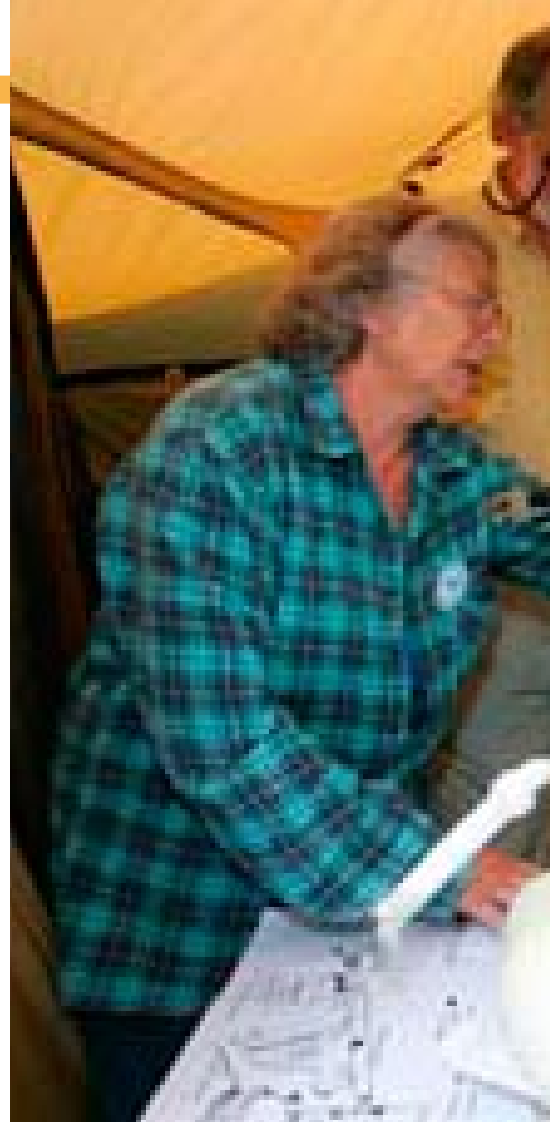
The short-lived Territory legislation was repealed by the federal government in 1996 after four people died. Since then, the Howard government has removed Nembutal and another barbiturate, Amytal, from the medical prescription list and introduced the Suicide Material Offences Bill 2005, which comes into force on January 6, 2006. The legislation penalises anyone who uses a carriage service (fax, telephone or email) to discuss suicide, with a fine of \$120,000 and up to \$500,000 for an organisation.

Exit International has been forced to split in two, with the political arm remaining in Australia and its counselling service and internet site set to commence from New Zealand.

According to John, from Queensland, the new legislation acted as a spur for the group to set in motion Exit International’s “peanut project” (“peanut” is American street slang for barbiturates).

“Admittedly the process needs a lot of fine-tuning and we need to find ways of simplifying it,” says John (who, like others in the group, did not want to have his surname published).

“Nevertheless, it’s been a monumental feat to get elderly people in a remote location to do something that has probably never been done by aged citizens anywhere. It’s been a rewarding experience and the main message is that the federal government can introduce all these draconian measures but they can’t stop us.”



The group met through Exit International, and communicated over the internet for 10 months; together they contributed \$40,000 to buy a vehicle, sophisticated laboratory equipment and the necessary raw materials. When they are satisfied they have enough of the drug, the equipment and expertise will be passed on to more than 100 others who are waiting.

The group came from all over the country, with one woman driving from Western Australia. There were also three observers from America, including Ted Goodwin, president and founding director of Final Exit, a society that helps dying people in the United States, and Faye Girsh, a senior adviser to the World Federation of the Right to Die Societies, an umbrella group for 30 voluntary euthanasia organisations in 26 countries.

“We really oppose the idea of a violent death, particularly in the United States where most people try to end their lives with guns,” she says. “That is a lonely and violent way, terrible for families and often doesn’t work. People should never have to die like that.”

Goodwin says he is appalled by the Suicide Material Offences Bill. “When people can be penalised for discussing an important issue like the right to die it is an attack on free speech. I wonder – if the right to free speech



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**DAWN FROM SYDNEY**

**CRYSTAL CLEAR**

Australian members of Exit International cook up a beakerful of Nembutal they say will give them a dignified death



can be denied in Australia, then other rights such as the right to assemblage or the right to elections could soon follow.”

The venue for the clandestine meeting was a NSW sheep-farming property in the state’s Southern Highlands made available by an absentee landlord. The 20 people gathered under the guise of a bird watchers’ reunion. A tent was erected next to an old shed and several of the basic ingredients, such as quicklime and pure alcohol, were made in a small forge and distillery. A Vegemite jar, an old frying pan and a plastic container of cooking oil that stood alongside sophisticated and expensive glass laboratory equipment attested to the group’s resourcefulness and ability to improvise.

“Much of the information [about how to make the drug] was gathered from text books in public or university libraries, and most of us have networks of friends with some knowledge about chemistry,” says Elaine, from Queensland.

Every member of the group was involved in the process – not only to gain “hands-on” experience but also to ensure safety in numbers if authorities decide to prosecute.

The highlight came late on Saturday night when, after 48 hours of slow chemical reactions, two flasks of clear liquid were placed

in a refrigerator. They were taken out next morning, their contents white and cloudy, with deadly crystals accumulated on the bottom that will later be filtered, dried and distributed to members of the group.

Dawn, 82, from Sydney, says seeing the white crystals has given her great peace of mind. “The process is completely beyond me but I am glad to be part of it. I have enjoyed every part of my life and this is as good as any. I am thrilled to be 80 and can do anything I want, but I will not be a vegetable in a nursing home. As long as I know it [the drug] is there, it doesn’t matter how long or short my life is. As long as I remember where I put it, I’ll be right.”

Fred, 94, from Queensland, criticised the federal government and authorities such as the church for forcing people to take desperate measures so they can die peacefully, with dignity and when they want to. “If I have the drug there, I don’t have to suffer the indignities the terminally ill have to suffer. It’s a loss of dignity not being able to wash and dress and look after yourself. There are those who feel they are a drain and embarrassment to their families and their rights should be respected. I think we are justified in challenging these stupid laws by taking the manufacturing into our own hands. Let them prosecute if they want to.” ●