

Making the right choice for you

yes TO DIGNITY
IN DYING

Recently I had the privilege to be present at my sister Gep's dying process.

It must seem an unusual word to use, but it is really the best way to describe the experience.

At 79, she had felt very tired, and when she finally went to her GP mid September, she was referred first to a cardiologist and then to an oncologist.

It was discovered that she had 2 leaking heart valves, an aneurysm, as well as pancreatic cancer that had spread to her liver.

Gep had just read 'The fault in our stars' about a teenage girl with terminal cancer and how she coped with her situation. She said that she hoped she could conduct herself and cope with her sickness as well as that girl had done.

Gep had already discussed with her GP, who had come to the Netherlands from Iran when he was 24, that she believed in euthanasia.

When she reminded the GP of her wish, he explained, that when a Euthanasia doctor came to assess her, and check her medical file, his decision stood for 2 months.

If the process was not activated within that time, she would need to be re-assessed.

So she asked her GP, to indicate when he felt that the euthanasia doctor should become involved. After that happened, I got a message that if I wanted to come I should do so ASAP.

I got on a plane that same afternoon and was at her bedside within 36 hours!

Physically she was very weak, but mentally Gep was in pretty good spirits, and so pleased to see me. The first few days she could still talk a bit, and had not lost her sense of humour, despite her condition. She told me that Friday was D-day!

Every time the doctor came to see her, he asked very gently if euthanasia was what she wanted, she remained very clear in her response.

She asked for her friend and me to be there at the end.

She wanted me there, because I had to return to NZ, where euthanasia is not an option (yet). I was to share the experience with friends and family in NZ.

On Friday afternoon when the doctor came to administer the drip in her arm, he asked again. We didn't hear the response, but saw him smile.

When asked what she said, he told us, that she asked if he was crazy!

Gep was right there with us that last afternoon, and at some stage she wanted to give me a piece of her jewellery.

She chose what she wanted me to have, and I will treasure that necklace.

Every now and then she asked the time, it was not going fast enough for her.

When the time came Gep gave us a big hug, and I was amazed at the strength she still had. She was ready to go.

When we sat talking to the GP afterwards (it was all over in 5 minutes) we asked him if he found this hard to do.

He did not, if a patient was sure what they wanted, and was surrounded by loving family or friends, then it was a beautiful experience.

Now that this is all over, Gep's case will still be discussed by a Euthanasia Control Committee, to determine if everything was handled correctly.

Sometimes a doctor can still be prosecuted if it is felt that the process has not been handled well.

The general public in the Netherlands accepts that euthanasia happens, and that it is mostly only a matter of days/weeks of shortening a person's suffering.

It is not much discussed, as it is seen as a very private decision.

No-one is really interested in the 'small detail' of just when and how, when death is inevitable.

All I can say is that my sister had a dignified, even beautiful dying process, and that I am thankful that I was able to be there.

Reader Submission • Nynke Piebenga

Please Note: This article was prepared and written by Nynke Piebenga in her personal capacity, The opinions expressed in this article are the authors own and do not reflect the view of Seasons Magazine.

