

SELECT COMMITTEE ON DEATH AND DYING WITH DIGNITY

COMMENTS OF SARA SUSAN RAPHALS

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My name is Sarah Susan Raphals. I am 89 years old, and have survived cancer by many years, as well as dire family illnesses. This is to tell you who I am.

Now to tell you what I think.

Human rights of every sort are basic to civilized democratic life. These cover a large panoply that I will not go into, but which are basically stated in the Charter of Human Rights which was the basis of the founding of the League of Nations (if I remember correctly), as well as the various charters adopted by most democratic countries.

The issue of euthanasia and suicide have reached high on the agenda with the miracles of modern medicine. In the U.S., Social Security was established in the 1930s when life expectancy was 70 years. Ergo retirement kicked in at 65 – averaging 5 years of payout at its inception. I have been living on US Social Security (together with my very modest pension) since I retired as an elementary school teacher 24 years ago.

The lives of the aged are stacked with medical problems the solution of which do not necessarily lead to a comfortable or happy life.

But each individual must judge the quality of his or her own life by his or her own standards. Ergo I do not favor euthanasia dictated by anyone other than the individual alone.

But here we come to definitions: death delivered by another person is euthanasia – in my view – and I do vigorously oppose it.

However, self-inflicted death is a basic human right which must be respected.

There are nuanced areas to be considered here. One is age – I apply this view to the aged – though there might be exceptions in younger years.

We are kinder to animals in misery than to people. Though I oppose infliction by another person and believe it is wrong, I strongly support a measure that would make the **means available** to all people who have reached the point of finding life intolerable – each in his own view – and by his or her own hand.

The difficulty I see is in cases where the person is too far gone – but if means are available earlier in the decline this might not become a case for euthanasia (which I consider wrong), but permit suicide (a basic individual right).

This would mean annulling section 241 of the Criminal Code.

I have known five people who have chosen suicide – dear friends and loved ones who lived many years in total misery. And witnessed their desperate maneuvers to find a means.

At this point in my life (4 months shy of 90 years old), all of my existing old friends (now just four left) pray to not wake up tomorrow morning and are frustrated that they cannot find or get the means to make that a reality. They are not what younger people would think of as suicidal. They are wonderful people who have lived long and rich lives, and who live in dread of the misery and helplessness that may await them before their inevitable end.

The cost to society in medical expenses is contributing to breaking many government budgets and shortchanging the medical and other needs of the young and middle aged.

We don't suffer our pets to go on in misery. But we condemn some of the old and elderly as well as younger people with hopeless infirmities to drag on day by day with no relief in sight.

All religions say, "thou shalt not kill." Yet we train and honor killers in the neverending wars made inevitable because governments cannot discuss and compromise. These are young men and women who have much to contribute to themselves and to society. While we criminalize self-destruction for those who have reached the end of their tether with disabilities, we honor the deaths of the healthy young.

I want to control my own life – it is my human right. No one else's hand – killing – should be tolerated. But means should be available to all individuals – painful as that may be.

The family and community of these unfortunate individuals suffer immensely seeing loved ones so totally miserable – and they suffer the death of a loved one. In a matter of weighing the suffering – one path, life, is ongoing with no end in sight. The alternative is loss and finality. As I see it, finality is the kindest and most loving alternative to a horrendous situation. And life goes on for the living in a more tolerable way. I know – I have felt and seen it.

Respect a suicide note, respect the individual.

To be clear – I am *not* arguing for suicide of the elderly infirm. I am arguing for **choice** which I consider to be a basic human right – the foundation of a democratic society. I am arguing **against** euthanasia as the hand of one human being against another's will – the basis of fascist ideology. Ergo I do see this field to be one aspect of the struggle the world has gone through so agonizingly in the course of my lifetime, in the many wars that have been fought. So many millions have died who might have had good, happy and productive lives, while an increasing number are forced to live on who are helpless and hopeless and have no means of directing the course of their own existence.

Though I don't support suicide for the infirm young – the constant development of medical research does give them some hope. I am perplexed in applying my views to them because there is hope. But **choice** is fundamental. As a result, I do not have a clear position in relation to the young.

But I do have strong views and feelings concerning the elderly. **Choice** and the means to exercise that choice should be made available to us.