

Role of media in influencing public opinion



The media – newspapers, television and the internet play a major role in our society. They can influence public opinion and don't always get their facts right.

In this work sheet we look at how media coverage can influence public opinion on controversial life issues such as euthanasia and abortion.

Take a look at these two press cuttings on the sad case of Reginald Crew.

The Daily Telegraph Terminally ill man plan Swiss trip to commit suicide

By Nigel Bunyan
01/01/2003

Reginald Crew: trip to Switzerland is 'last chance of dying with dignity'

Reginald Crew, 74, who suffers from motor neurone disease, believes that the trip represents his last chance of dying with dignity.

He has applied to join Dignitas, a Zurich-based organisation, which helps people to take their own lives with a fatal dose of barbiturates. If his application is accepted, he hopes to fly to Switzerland early in the New Year.

Mr Crew, of Hunt's Cross, Liverpool, would become the second Briton to end his life with the help of Dignitas. The first, a 77-year-old man with throat cancer, committed suicide in October. His identity was not disclosed.

Mr Crew, who is married with a grown-up daughter, has been ill for four years. He learned of Dignitas through a television documentary. He said: "I watched this programme and thought 'This is my last chance'.
"Getting this would be the best gift I could hope for. It is the only chance I have left.

"Even getting up in the morning is like running a four-minute mile and I am sick of it. It is killing my family to look after me and it is killing me to have to live like this."

His wife, Win, 71, said: "I feel sick inside, but what choice have I got? Life is so bad that even if they put me in prison when I came back I wouldn't care."

Ludwig Minelli, the Swiss lawyer who founded Dignitas five years ago, said Mr Crew's case appeared to be the sort that his clinic would deal with.

He went on: "He would have to follow the usual procedure, which is to send a letter of application with medical documents.

"We send these documents to a Swiss pharmacist to ask if he is prepared to write a prescription for the person. If he says yes, we give the member a provisional green light.

"The member is asked to give a date and we try to arrange it. He must come to Zurich and speak with a physician, when the definite green light is given if he is in a fit mental state. Then he is

brought to our apartment in Zurich, where the assisted suicide takes place. This is by barbiturate with a glass of water."

Mr Crew has been anxious to publicise his wish to die in the hope of promoting euthanasia in Britain.

His wife said: "We watched the Diane Pretty case and could not believe it when she lost.

"Reg wants people to understand what it is to have this disease. He can't feed or bathe himself. He can't lie down because of the agony. He has lost his neck muscles so he can't eat solids, and soon he will lose his voice.

"Our laws say he has to become a shell of a man, being fed by tubes into the stomach, before he is allowed to die.

"We don't want to go to Switzerland to do this but we have no choice."

A spokesman for the Department of Health said Mr Crew would be acting within the law "provided it is legal in the country he is visiting".

Terminally ill Briton helped to die in Zurich

Pensioner paralysed by motor neurone disease evades law by ending life in Switzerland

David Ward
Tuesday January 21, 2003

A pensioner paralysed by motor neurone disease ended his life yesterday with a lethal drink of barbiturates.

Reginald Crew, 74, a former Ford worker from Liverpool, took the potion in a flat in Zurich, having gone to Switzerland because under British law it is an offence to assist in suicide.

He had the help of Dignitas, a non-profit Swiss organisation set up in 1998 by Ludwig Minelli, a journalist and human rights campaigner, so that the seriously ill might die with dignity. It is thought to have helped more than 100 people.

Mr Crew died in the presence of his wife, Wyn, 71, and daughter, Jan, 41. He was paralysed from the neck down, and his wife had cared for him since he was diagnosed with the incurable disease four years ago.

He is believed to be the second Briton to go to Dignitas but the first to have gone public with his intention.

Last night Mr Minelli said that he and a doctor had talked with Mr Crew when he arrived at their Zurich office. "He was extremely calm, and extremely happy that he had found Dignitas which gave him this possibility.

"The physician then wrote a prescription for him. We took him to our apartment in Zurich and he was given medicine to prevent vomiting.

"After half an hour, he was prepared to drink [the mixture of water and barbiturates]. This would have made him fall asleep within two to five minutes. After that he fell into a deep coma and then stopped breathing."

Mr Minelli said he was not at the flat, because he never attends the deaths of people who seek Dignitas's help, but an experienced nurse from the organisation was.

"He told me that he was very angry that he had had to leave Britain to have his will fulfilled," said Mr Minelli. "And I am also angry."

"I cannot understand why such reasonable human beings as Britons are not capable of following what the holy saint Thomas More wrote in his Utopia in 1517.

"He wrote then of exactly what we have given to Mr Crew - the possibility to leave this life, when life is only causing pains."

Mr Crew used to enjoy golf and hiking, but his health had deteriorated rapidly in recent months; he was able to eat only porridge and soup. He said that the job of caring for him was killing his wife.

He paid £50 to join Dignitas after seeing a TV programme about it. At that time he said: "I am just existing in a living hell. I don't want to die any longer. I have spoken to

all my family about my decision, and they agree with me. I'm not ashamed I want to die and I'm not a coward, I'm fully prepared to meet my maker.

"When my legs went last year I could see my life was going backwards. I don't want to be kept alive like an animal in a cage. I want to be put down now. It's really taken a turn for the worse in the last few months. I'm living in absolute agony, and every day is getting harder."

The most recent of several challenges to Britain's ban on assisted suicide was by Diane Pretty, who went to court to claim she had the right to choose when to die. Her arguments were rejected, and the European court upheld the ruling.

Swiss law does not state that assisted suicide is legal but the practice is considered as an "humane act".

QUESTIONS:

How do these articles make you feel about the "right to die"? Is your initial reaction after reading then to feel more or less in support of euthanasia being legally allowed in Britain?

The case of Reginald Crew was promoted by the Voluntary Euthanasia Society. Through their assistance the case was even covered on ITV with a film crew from Tonight with Trevor McDonald following Mr Crew through his final hours. The final broadcast made no attempt to put the arguments against euthanasia. One Labour Member of Parliament, Brian Iddon branded the programme a “public disgrace”.

The Voluntary Euthanasia Society used the tragic case of Reg Crew to gather public support for an attempt the following year to change the law on euthanasia. They obviously felt that the media coverage of this tragic event helped their cause.

Disabled people too felt that the media coverage would affect public opinion but unlike the Voluntary Euthanasia Society they worried about the effect of the coverage. The chairman of the Disability Rights Commission, Bert Massie said this:

“Last week, Reginald Crew, who had Motor Neurone Disease, flew from Liverpool to Switzerland to end his life. It resulted in considerable press coverage, including in the Liverpool Echo. The general tone was to support Mr Crew and to suggest that there should be a similar right to die in the UK. . . . We do not believe that sufficient safeguards can be built into law to protect disabled people from having our lives ended prematurely and inappropriately. Stories we hear from Holland and the United States suggest that people have been encouraged to die or not kept alive because of, for example, a history of mental illness.

An under laying assumption of much of the press comment on the Crew death is that he was so disabled that to prefer death was the rational option. Certainly we must approach such issues with great compassion. However, I do grow concerned about hidden assumptions that disabled people must have such dreadful lives that our lives are not worth living. We must resist such interpretations of our lives.” Bert Massie, Speech to Liverpool City Council Disabled Workers Group, January 2003. You can read the full speech at:

http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/drc/library/drc_speeches/bert_massie_-_liverpool_city_c.html

Jane Campbell, a disabled commissioner and colleague of Bert Massie at the Disability Rights Commission also wrote in The Independent newspaper the day following Reg Crew’s death in the following terms:

“In Switzerland yesterday Reginald Crew, a man terminally ill with motor neurone disease, took a fatal dose of barbiturates prepared by a doctor and ended his life. There is a gathering momentum to legalise assisted suicide for those who feel life has become unbearable. Some feel that such people as Mr Crew, who say they have nothing to live for, should be allowed to end their lives without having to go abroad to do so.

I feel a great sadness when a disabled person sees no option other than euthanasia. While I would defend a person's choice to end their own life, I could never accept the dangers that would attend the legalisation of assisted suicide, and if that means that a very small number of people are forced to live against their will, so be it. Providing a regulatory framework for terminally ill patients to end their lives would place many disabled people in mortal danger.”

Jane Campbell felt so strongly about the dangers to disabled people from euthanasia that she has set up an organisation dedicated to the issue.

You can read more about it at: http://www.livingwithdignity.info/ndy_aboutus.html

QUESTIONS:

- Why do you think that the media cover controversial issues such as euthanasia in this way?
- Do you think that covering issues in this way helps to provide you with all the information you need to form your own opinion?
- There is a well-known saying: “Hard cases make bad law” – What do you think this means? How might it apply to the story of Reg Crew?

In 2005 the House of Lords was considering proposals to weaken the law against euthanasia. The Disability Rights Commission made a submission on the subject to the House of Lords. The Submission included the following points:

"The DRC is a rights-based organisation and aims to uphold and further the rights of disabled people. We cannot conclude that legislating for a right to die would positively increase disabled people's autonomy or prevent disability discrimination. We believe it would result in the opposite – creating a 'false choice' given the lack of palliative care and support services in particular – and we believe it is likely to produce a further level of discrimination in the experiences of disabled people in the health service. It is plausible that a new assumption by medical professionals would be created in favour of ending life or emphasising the 'choice' of death in the absence of seemingly viable alternatives, due partly to prejudicial ideas on the quality of life and opportunities of disabled people."

The role of the media in shaping public opinion is clearly mentioned in the submission:

"Disabled people also describe more subtle pressures that can make life seem unbearable. In a culture that still views disability as a tragedy and disabled people as victims many people who become disabled assume initially that their life is over. This view is most apparent in the media and is worrying given that more than 80 per cent of disabled people become disabled as adults".

The media's portrayal of disability appears to influence the opinions even of disabled people themselves. Dr Ian Basnett states in the submission to the House of Lords:

"I became quadriplegic following a sporting accident 17 years ago. I was ventilator dependent for a while and said to people "I wish I was dead!" I am now extraordinarily glad that assisted dying was not legal. I think the first difficulty I faced was that, like many people, I had a terribly negative image of disability. When you suddenly become severely disabled you still have that viewpoint".

You can read the full submission by the Disability Rights Commission (now part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission) at:

http://83.137.212.42/sitearchive/DRC/library/policy/health_and_independent_living/assisted_dying_policy_statemen.html

QUESTIONS:

- The submission made by the Disability Rights Commission to the House of Lords made the point that no major organisation for disabled people supported moves to weaken the law on euthanasia. Yet this received hardly any media coverage in contrast to the blanket coverage of Reg Crew's final journey to Switzerland. Why do you think this is?
- Imagine you are a newspaper or television programme editor. What issues might you focus upon to ensure that a balanced view of life with a disability is presented?



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