

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Sunderland		
Unit of Assessment: 20 Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: Influencing international government policy on and public attitudes towards assisted suicide		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2013-2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Kevin Yuill	Associate Professor	1999-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Kevin Yuill's research on assisted suicide has set the current debates on the issue into historical context, challenging assumptions and providing new perspectives. His ideas and findings have directly shaped national policy in the Netherlands and New Zealand, and influenced policymakers in Denmark and the USA. His numerous appearances to discuss his work in mainstream and specialist media and at live debates and cultural festivals worldwide have informed public debate and shaped individual attitudes. The research has been cited by influential campaigners on both sides of the argument.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) Dr Yuill's research examines the changing relationship between the individual and the state. It situates the present discussion about assisted dying, euthanasia and end-of-life concerns historically, showing that, rather than a constant ethical discussion dating back many centuries, the present 'right-to-die' debate emerged around 1970 and is historically distinct from previous discussions of euthanasia (R1). Furthermore, the idea that suicides required assistance did not exist before the twentieth century (R2).</p> <p>In the 1970s, alongside a growing critique of medical paternalism, the voluntary euthanasia movement, as it was then called, switched focus from the need for population control and eugenic culling of 'inferior' individuals to autonomy for dying individuals. In this change of focus, citizens were less independent actors who determined their own fates, and were instead characterised as helpless dependents relying on the American government to accomplish tasks that they had always done for themselves. Dying became something that was done to an individual rather than, as it had been, something that happens. It became a responsibility of the state.</p> <p>Yuill's project indicates the historical specificity of these developments but also challenges some of the assumptions that underlie the debate today. In Chapter 3 of R1, on the origins of the right to die movement, Yuill indicates how the discussion emerged not because of advances in technology but because of a shift in the relationship between citizen and government, an idea he explores in other works. He indicates the historical specificity of the promotion of 'the right to die'. In R2 he shows that, when a cultural toleration of suicide on the basis of self-government appeared in the 1890s' United States, there was no separate discussion of the need to 'assist' suicide; moreover, euthanasia and suicide were separate discussions.</p>		
<p>3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references) R1 Yuill, Kevin (2013, 2015) <i>Assisted Suicide: the Liberal, Humanist Case Against Legalization</i>. Palgrave MacMillan. Quality indicators: Peer-reviewed monograph. 29</p>		

citations. A review in *Disability and Society* describes it as: “a timely and welcome volume from the United Kingdom, but with an international focus, in a fundamental but oft academically under-analysed area over the last 30 years.... *Assisted Suicide* is still by far the best book on this subject in many years.” Susie Balderston (2014) *Assisted suicide: the liberal, humanist cast against legalization*, *Disability & Society*, 29:3, 491-493

R2 Yuill, Kevin (2015) *The Unfreedom of Assisted Suicide: How the right to die undermines autonomy*. *Ethics, Medicine, and Public Health* (1). pp. 494-502. **Quality indicator:** peer-reviewed journal article.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Policymakers worldwide have engaged with Yuill’s research, either through invited testimony or as a result of reading his work. He himself has been proactive in stimulating public debate and discussion, bringing the topic out of government inquiry and into the public realm. Despite taking a very specific position on the issue, Yuill’s research has informed both sides of the debate.

Impact on national governments and organisations

The Netherlands: In 2013 the Dutch government commissioned an investigation into the possibility of providing euthanasia to those over the age of 70 who were ‘tired of life’. A member of the Schnabel Committee tasked with this investigation used Yuill’s research (**R1**) in forming his response to the question of the moral responsibility of the government. **His argument**, that there is no reason to amend existing legislation on euthanasia **was accepted by the jurists, informed the outcome of the investigation and is reflected in the recommendations of its 2016 final report which the government have accepted**. The final report (**S1**) cites Yuill’s book and the Committee member confirms that it played a significant role in the inquiry (**S2**).

New Zealand: In 2015, a case in the New Zealand High Court challenged the law on euthanasia. Yuill contributed to the debate about the trial in the media (**S3**) and stimulated public discussion of the topic through invited appearances at awareness-raising events organised by Euthanasia-Free New Zealand in Auckland, Hamilton and Wellington. Comments from the audience include “*I was pro-assisted suicide, but these two talks changed my mind*” and “[Yuill] outlined a new perspective which has been useful and strengthened my opposition” (**S3**). In 2016 Yuill submitted evidence to the debate on the End of Life Choices Bill in New Zealand’s Parliament (**S4**). **The NZ Health Select Committee took this written testimony and invited him to give oral evidence** in March 2017 (**S4**). In line with Yuill’s position, the committee recommended that no changes to current practice were necessary (**S5**). Yuill was **subsequently invited to write a submission** to a new assisted suicide bill (which proposed to give people with a terminal illness or a grievous and irremediable medical condition the option of requesting assisted dying) **by the former head of the NZ Health Select Committee**, who wrote that “*I am very conscious of your expertise and interest in the matter*” and that “*those in the sector, here and overseas, speak very highly of your insights*” (**S6**). Dr. David E. Richmond of the University of Auckland, in his testimony to the Bill, held (**R1**) up as “**one of the best critical analyses of Bills such as this**” (**S7**).

USA: Yuill’s research **informed the official position of the American College of Physicians**, published in October 2017. His work is cited in their position paper (**S8**) to support their warning that “*making physicians arbiters of assisted suicide is a return to paternalism and not a power physicians should want*” and carries through into their conclusion that “*Control over the manner and timing of a person’s death has not been and should not be a goal of medicine*”.

Denmark: The Danish Council of Ethics is a government-mandated independent body that advises policymakers on current issues. A council member who routinely advises politicians and the public about ethical issues says that during the assessment period he has often drawn upon the “*splendid observations*” Yuill makes in his historical research (**S9**).

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Impact on public discussion and debate

Yuill has drawn on his research to animate and diversify public debate about assisted suicide in general, and more recently, on assisted suicide during the COVID-19 pandemic (**S3**). **The combined reach of his media appearances during the assessment period is in excess of 9 million people around the world** (see table). His contributions include articles in mainstream and specialist media, broadcast debates with prominent thinkers and journalists, and print, TV and radio interviews. He participated in debates at the 2017 Belief and Beyond Belief Festival (UK) and the 2019 Battle of Ideas (UK), and in 2016 gave the Telders Lecture, a prestigious annual lecture at the Telders Foundation (Netherlands).

Publication/Broadcaster	Country	Date	Circulation/audience
The Economist	UK	22 and 28/8/18	1,657,795
The Telegraph	UK	20/1/15, 2/2/15, 4/6/16	3,154,000
The Independent	UK	18/7/14	2,299,000
The Spectator	UK	27/7/17	76,201
British Medical Journal	UK	3/7/14	88,500
Spiked Online	UK	14/4/20	Unknown
BBC Radio 4 Moral Maze	UK	16/7/14	890,000
Radio New Zealand Morning Report	New Zealand	25/5/15	464,000
Magic Radio	New Zealand	25/5/17	416,700

Impact on activism and campaigning

Activists and campaigners on both sides of the assisted suicide agenda have drawn on Yuill's research. The Chair of the pro-assisted dying organisation Go Gentle has used recordings of a speech Yuill gave at a conference in Adelaide in four episodes of his podcast, Better Off Dead (**S10**). Yuill was invited speaker at *Euthanasia 2016* in Amsterdam, a pro-euthanasia conference organised by Dutch Euthanasia Campaigning Group VVD.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of ten references)

- S1** Email from member of Schnabel Committee
- S2** Voltooid leven: Over hulp bij zelfdoding aan mensen die hun leven voltooid achten (Final report of the Schnabel Committee)
- S3** Details and feedback from media and public appearances
- S4** Testimonies for End of Life Bill – Written: 29 Jan 2016, oral: 4 March 2017
- S5** End of Life Choices Bill
- S6** Statement of support from Member of Parliament for Tamaki, New Zealand
- S7** Testimony for End of Life Bill by Professor Emeritus, The University of Auckland
- S8** [Ethics and the Legalization of Physician-Assisted Suicide: An American College of Physicians Position Paper \(17/10/17\)](#)
- S9** Statement of support from member of the Danish Council on Ethics
- S10** Better Off Dead podcast episodes 1, 9, 13, 15