

(*NVVE, 2 de marzo de 2012*). A mobile euthanasia programme launched in the Netherlands yesterday, sending six specialised roving medical teams door-to-door to help patients end their lives free of charge in their own homes.

The project is the brainchild of the Dutch largely donor-funded Right to Die NL. It follows the government's 2002 decision to legalise euthanasia, making the Netherlands the first country in the world to do so. Walburg de Jong, a spokeswoman for the organisation said that since the ruling some 3,100 assisted suicides had been carried out annually. The mobile euthanasia teams, she said, operated free of charge and were designed to make it easier for patients enduring interminable suffering to end their lives.

"Many doctors continue to be afraid of performing euthanasia. They claim that it is against their religion or they simply don't know the law regarding the issue," she said. "Our teams will carry out euthanasia at patients' homes should their normal doctor be unable or refuse to help them." Right to Die said it had received 70 phone calls from potential assisted suicide patients since the scheme was announced in early February. It said that the teams expected to receive around 1,000 requests each year.

The organisation stressed that its mobile units were comprised of doctors and nurses specially trained in performing assisted suicide at its clinic. It said the procedure involved injecting the patient first with a sleep-inducing drug and then with barbiturates to stop heart and lung function.

However, the concept met with criticism from the Royal Dutch Society of Doctors, which represents 53,000 physicians and medical students. It said it seriously doubted whether the euthanasia teams' mobile doctors could form a close enough relationship with the patients to decide whether assisted suicide should be carried out. "Euthanasia is a complicated process. It comes from the long-term treatment of a patient based on a relationship of trust," a society spokesman said. "We have serious doubts whether this can be done by a doctor who is only focused on performing euthanasia."

But Edith Schippers, the Dutch Health Minister, insisted that mobile euthanasia was in line with the government's 2002 decision to legalise assisted suicide and that she was confident that the new programme would comply fully with the strict guidelines.

Under Dutch law patients must be fully mentally alert when requesting assisted suicide. Two doctors must agree that there is no cure available and that the patient faces "unbearable and interminable suffering".