

## Euthanasia twins 'had nothing to live for'

The two deaf twins killed by legal euthanasia in Belgium were frightened of losing their independence in an institution and had "nothing to live for".



Marc and Eddy Verbessem had spent their entire lives together, sharing a flat and both working as cobblers Photo: Gazet Van Antwerpen

By Bruno Waterfield, Putte

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The two men, both aged 45, named as Marc and Eddy Verbessem, from the village of Putte, near the city of Mechelen, were both born deaf and asked for a mercy killing after finding that they would also soon go blind.

Dirk Verbessem, 46, explained that his younger brothers had lived together for all their adult lives and could not communicate with the outside world.

"Their great fear was that they would no longer be able to see each other. That was for my brothers unbearable," he said.

The deaf twin brothers had spent their entire lives together, sharing a flat while both working as cobblers and could only communicate with special sign language understood by each other and their immediate family.

"They lived together, did their own cooking and cleaning. You could eat off the floor. Blindness would have made them completely dependent. They did not want to be in an institution," said Mr Verbessem.

"I sometimes think, if they had their own wives and children, perhaps they would have had something to live for."

The brother and his parents, Mary and Remy, tried to stop the twins but were eventually persuaded by them that their lives should be ended under Belgium's euthanasia laws.

After enlisting the support of their local doctor, it took the twins almost two years to find a medical institution to administer a lethal injection after being turned down by their local hospital.

Four weeks ago, dressed in new shoes and suits, Marc and Eddy bid farewell to their parents and brother at Brussels University Hospital in Jette.



"I tried to talk them out of it even at the last moment," said their brother. "Together with my parents, I said goodbye. Marc and Eddy waved again at us. 'Up in the sky,' they said. 'Up in the sky,' we replied. And then it was over."

David Dufour, their local doctor, told The Daily Telegraph that as well as congenital deafness and approaching blindness caused by a genetically caused form of glaucoma, the twins had other severe medical problems.

"All that together made life unbearable. I have been very surprised but there is so much interest and debate about this," he said.

Dr Dufour said that the Verbessem family had overcome their opposition to the idea of euthanasia

to help the twins make their case to doctors. "I have boundless respect for their parents and brother," he said. "Their family gave them the best, but hardest gift."

Under Belgian law euthanasia is allowed if a patient is able to make their wishes clear and a doctor judges that they are suffering unbearable pain.

The Verbessem case is unusual because neither of the men was terminally ill nor suffering physical pain.

Professor Wim Distelmans, the doctor that took the decision to euthanise the twins, defended his decision.

"It's the first time in the world that a 'double euthanasia' has been performed on brothers," he said. "There was certainly unbearable psychological suffering for them. Though there is of course it always possible to stretch the interpretation of that. One doctor will evaluate differently than the other."

Last month, Belgium's government announced plans to amend the law to allow the euthanasia of children and Alzheimer's sufferers. If passed, the new law will allow euthanasia to be "extended to minors if they are capable of discernment or affected by an incurable illness or suffering that we cannot alleviate".

Chris Gastmans, professor of medical ethics at the Catholic University of Leuven, expressed fear over the wider implications for the welfare of disabled people after the assisted suicide.

"In a society as wealthy as ours, we must find another, caring way to deal with human frailty," he said.

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