



Medical doctor Anrich Burger was a sports enthusiast before the accident that left him a quadriplegic.



I JUST WANT TO DIE

Paralysed in a car accident, Anrich spends his waking hours in agonising pain and he yearns for the release of death

By PIETER VAN ZYL Pictures: CORRIE HANSEN

HE LONGS for euthanasia as he yearns for a single pain-free day. He'd also like to be able to do something as simple as making a cup of coffee. But most of all he wants the right to die with dignity.

Anrich Burger (42) is a medical doctor and has been a quadriplegic for the past eight years since a car in which he was a passenger was involved in an accident.

"Before the accident if I had a spare hour or so I'd go for a ride in a boat, ski or drive somewhere on a quad bike or mountain bike," Anrich says. "I never sat around waiting for something to happen."

Three months after the accident he tried to kill himself. "I took an overdose of pills because I knew about all the complications: the bladder infections, the kidney stones, the bedsores..."

His suicide attempt failed because the

dose was too small. Anrich then applied to Dignitas, a clinic in Switzerland where people can legally be helped to die. The clinic agreed to accept him but in the end it was too expensive to die in a foreign country.

Now he lies in a crisp white bed in his modern house near Paarl in the Western Cape. If he went for a ride in his wheelchair it would be past vineyards and white houses. But today he's in too much agony.

For most of the day he endures severe pain

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'How do you handle the next 20, 30 years?'

in the damaged nerves of his paralysed legs. On the days he wants to be productive he's incapacitated by pain.

"No one knows why people with spinal cord injuries experience such pain," he says. "I could spend years living like this – until my body deteriorates to such an extent that I die. How do you handle the next 20, 30 years? And what about the financial implications?"

"Inside you don't want to die but for me death would be a release."

ONCE looked as if Anrich, a former learner at Framesby High School in Port Elizabeth, had a bright future. "I played Craven Week for three years," he says proudly about the prestigious school rugby tournament.

As a doctor he built up a successful practice in neighbouring Western Cape coastal towns Macassar and Strand. He also spent time working in England and Canada.

"In 2005 I wanted to follow my dream by enrolling for a course in acute and emergency medicine in Canada," he recalls. Little did he know he'd need emergency treatment one day.

On 3 July 2005 he was paralysed from the neck down in an accident in a four-wheel drive vehicle north of Maun, Botswana. "Two little bones in my neck broke and caused all this chaos in my life," he says.

He lost the use of his legs and arms but can use his right hand a little to operate a computer and propel his wheelchair. "I'm disappointed that life threw me this curve ball. There are quadriplegics like me who are embittered but we tend to say what people want to hear, 'I'm doing all right. I have a full life'. How can you have a full life if you're dependent on others?"

Now and again a helper comes into his bedroom to give him water through a straw, spray his nose to enable him to speak more clearly and give him drops for the pain.

He says his fiancée sacrificed her life for his sake. They met a few months after the accident when she moved into a garden flat behind his house in Somerset West, where he used to live. "She was a salesperson in the motor industry. Now she works only part time. She helps me with bathing and administration and takes care of me." She also helps Anrich when he occasionally examines patients for things such as disability grants.

Although he considered taking his life soon after the accident he initially had some hope. In 2008 he went to a faith centre in Johannesburg wanting to be healed. Pastor Chris Oyakhilome of Nigeria came there to pray for the sick but Anrich wasn't one of

the chosen. "My faith apparently wasn't strong enough," he says bitterly.

A year later Anrich considered an experimental operation in which cloned stem cells are transplanted into the spinal cord. After the disappointment with faith healing he wasn't keen to have the treatment because he wasn't sure if the surgery would give him back the use of his limbs. "In 2012 the operation was done on someone else," he says. "To date there's been little to no progress."

Soon after the accident Anrich came across the Dignitas website. The clinic requires medicolegal and psychological reports before approving patients for assisted dying. "The problem is none of the documents may be more than three months old. I'd have one report but be waiting for the next and by the time I got it the first one would be too old. When I had the green light I couldn't afford it."

An air ticket in business class costs R60 000. He has to be seated there to accommodate everything he needs to be comfortable. Dignitas charges about €15 000 (about R202 500).

No legal steps were taken against the driver of the vehicle involved in the accident but he and Anrich reached a settlement three years later whereby he'd pay Anrich R12 500 a month for five years. The payments cease at the end of this year.

Anrich's fiancée looks in on us and smiles. When she's left Anrich says, "She smiles but deep inside she knows what I want to do and doesn't like it. To her it's terrible that I want to die. She really loves me."

SEAN DAVISON ON THE PLIGHT OF THE DISABLED

Anrich Burger has opened his eyes to the suffering of the severely physically disabled, says Professor Sean Davison of the organisation DignitySA, which is striving to make euthanasia legal for the terminally ill. It's working on a three-year strategy to get a draft law on the issue before parliament.

Professor Davison believes legislation should also permit people in Anrich's situation to have an assisted death if they choose. "I'll be making a personal submission to parliament to also support severely physically disabled people's right to die."

"In countries such as the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium legislation makes it possible for someone in Anrich's situation to end his life."

"He's desperate to die. He's not just trapped in a paralysed body, he's in pain no medication can ease. He's too disabled

"There have been times when for her sake I've considered not wanting to die – but then a bad morning strikes. You wake with the anxiety of being paralysed. The pain is unpredictable. It can be very bad, even with a morphine patch."

He's worried about his mom, Wilma du Pisani – she has buried two husbands. Anrich's pilot father, Hansie Burger, was killed in a flying accident near George when Anrich was two and his stepfather, Leon du Pisani, died in 2011 of an asthma attack.

"When my mother phones I groan with pain. Just imagine how she must feel because she can't help me," Anrich says.

"My child doesn't want to live any more and I've accepted that," Wilma says from her home in PE. "I'll miss my son a lot – but not his pain and suffering."

Friends told him about Professor Sean Davison who helped his mom die in New Zealand and later started the organisation DignitySA to work towards getting euthanasia legalised in SA. "If there were such a service in SA you could go there when the time was right," Anrich says.

"I had a full life. I was self-supporting. Not any more." ■



Professor Davison wants to give people such as Anrich a voice.

to end his life; he needs help to die."

People should have the right to die in their own country and own home, in a familiar environment surrounded by the people they love, Professor Davison says.

Why should Anrich or anyone else have to go abroad to die because his own parliament can't deal with this difficult issue?

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