

ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

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1. Introduction

DignitySA is registered as Non-Profit Company (NPC) that was established in response to the growing recognition of the need for legal and societal reform regarding end-of-life choices in South Africa. Since its inception in 2011, DignitySA has been at the forefront of advocacy for the rights of individuals to make autonomous medical decisions, including the right to choose medical assistance in dying. The organisation's work is rooted in the principles of human dignity, compassion, and respect for personal autonomy, and it has consistently sought to inform public discourse and promote legal reform in South Africa to enable individuals to exercise these rights.

2. Vision and Mission

- **Vision**

DignitySA envisions a South Africa where every individual is supported throughout life's final journey with compassionate care, dignity, and the freedom to choose their own path.

- **Mission**

DignitySA's mission is to pursue advocacy and collaboration alongside legal and healthcare reform initiatives so that every person in South Africa can access the full range of end-of-life care options, with their choices respected and legally protected.

3. Areas of Focus

DignitySA's work is structured around the four focus areas detailed below. In addition to advocacy, which is our core work, our organisation provides resources and advice with regard to end-of-life decision making.

3.1 Palliative Care

DignitySA advocates for improved access to high-quality palliative care, ensuring optimal pain management and comprehensive support for all South Africans with terminal or intractable conditions.

3.2 Withholding and Withdrawal of Life-Sustaining Care

The organisation supports the right of patients and families to refuse or discontinue life-sustaining medical treatments when they determine that the burdens of such treatments outweigh the benefits.

3.3 Advance Healthcare Directives

DignitySA champions the legal recognition and enforcement of advance healthcare directives, ensuring that healthcare professionals honour patients' documented wishes regarding their end-of-life care, including decisions about life-sustaining treatment.

3.4 Assisted Dying

The organisation leads legal reform initiatives to establish and protect the right of informed adults facing terminal or irremediable conditions, which cause intolerable suffering, to request medical assistance in dying when all other acceptable treatment options have been exhausted.

4. Advocacy and Current Activities

DignitySA engages actively in advocacy and public education to promote compassionate end-of-life care and the legal recognition of patient autonomy. The organisation collaborates with legal, medical, and civil society stakeholders to advance its objectives. Its advocacy efforts include:

- Promoting legislative and policy reforms to enable and protect the rights of individuals to make informed choices about their end-of-life care.
- Raising public awareness about the importance of palliative care, advance directives, and the ethical considerations surrounding assisted dying.
- Supporting individuals and families navigating complex end-of-life decisions, including providing information and resources.
- Engaging in fundraising activities to support its mission.

5. Historical Milestones

- **2011:** DignitySA is founded by Professors Sean Davison (UWC) and Willem Landman (US). The organisation's inception was closely linked to the personal experiences of Professor Sean Davison, who, in September 2010, was arrested in New Zealand on a charge of attempted murder after assisting his terminally ill mother, Patricia Ferguson, to die by administering a lethal dose of morphine. During his High Court jury trial, Professor Davison was cleared of attempted murder after pleading guilty to a lesser charge of assisted suicide, for which he was sentenced to five months of house arrest. Upon his return to South Africa, Professors Davison and Landman established DignitySA as a formal entity to advocate for the rights of individuals facing end-of-life decisions (and New Zealand subsequently legalised assisted dying).
- **2012:** DignitySA is formally registered as a not-for-profit organisation (NPO) in January and as a public benefit organisation (PBO) in April.
- **2015:** DignitySA supports the landmark legal case of Stransham-Ford v Minister of Justice and Correctional Services, which brought national attention to the issue of assisted dying and highlighted the need for legislative reform. DignitySA obtained *pro bono* legal representation for Adv Robin Stransham-Ford for his application to be granted legal permission to be lawfully medically assisted with dying (North Gauteng High Court, 2015). With Judge Hans Fabricius presiding, Stransham-Ford was granted such permission, but regrettably this was posthumously as he had died two hours before the court ruling.
- **2016:** The Minister of Justice and Correctional Services and the Minister of Health appealed the High Court's decision to the Supreme Court of Appeal (SCA). Once again, DignitySA engaged the *pro bono* advocates who appeared for Stransham-Ford's estate. In December the SCA upheld the appeal, setting aside the High Court's order on technical and procedural grounds. The ruling did however leave the door open for future cases on physician-assisted dying, suggesting that the issue could be reconsidered under more appropriate circumstances, with a proper factual record and a comprehensive legal analysis. The SCA highlighted that the development of such complex and morally charged areas of law is often best addressed by Parliament, rather than through individual court applications. In essence, the 2016 SCA ruling emphasised the need for a more robust and comprehensive legal and factual foundation for such a significant change to the common law. In addition, a full bench of the SCA held that DignitySA was a legitimate entity to act in the public interest in a future case to "rectify" the "deficiency" in our law (common law versus constitutional rights).
- **2016:** Archbishop Tutu used the occasion of his 85th birthday to lend his support and moral weight to DignitySA's campaign for assisted dying (SABC news coverage at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lsgeBb990hc>)
- **2017 - 2022:** The *pro bono* advocates in the Stransham-Ford cases initiated a new court application with Mr Diethelm (Dieter) Harck and Dr Sue Walter as applicants. DignitySA was not a party to

proceedings but supported the applicants. During Covid-19 (2021), a judge heard testimony via the internet, but he died shortly after the conclusion of proceedings. In December 2022, Mr Harck decided to abandon his court application and join DignitySA's current court application.

- **2018:** With the parliamentary legal team, DignitySA wrote an amendment to the National Health Act (61 of 2003) to legalise advance directives (living will and durable power of attorney for healthcare). A new election and new parliament, and then Covid-19, put an end to this initiative at the time.
- **2018:** DignitySA hosted the World Conference of Right to Die Societies in Cape Town and co-founder, Prof Sean Davison, served as the Conference's Chairperson at the time.
- **2023:** After seeking counsel, DignitySA made a strategic decision to assemble a legal team and embark on the current court application in January 2023. This was facilitated by a bequest of R1million that the organization received early in this year.
- **2024:** Significantly, prominent local medical doctors authored an editorial in the South Africa Medical Journal (SAMJ, February 2024, Vol. 114, No. 2) expressing support for DignitySA's court challenge and arguing that medically assisted dying, when responsibly practised, aligns with medical ethics.
- **2024:** A further donation of another R1 million made it possible for DignitySA to continue their legal process and make necessary adjustments to their legal team.
- **2025:** At their Annual General Meeting in February, DignitySA's members ratified an extension of the organisation's mandate to formally encompass advocating for access to a range of end-of-life options including high-quality palliative care, the withholding or withdrawal of life-sustaining treatment and ensuring a sound legal basis for advance directives as well as the legalisation of assisted dying in South Africa.
- **2025:** An additional R2 million in funding has been received in the first quarter of the current financial year, enabling Dignity SA to prepare to lodge its case, attend and avail poster presentations at the national Palliative Care Conference in June and to help to launch a collaborative Advance Directives Campaign (<https://www.advancedirectives.org.za/>).
- **Ongoing:** The organisation continues to provide expert input to parliamentary committees, contribute to public-policy discussions, and support individuals and families navigating end-of-life decisions (see section 7: Public Profile for more).

6. Governance

DignitySA operates as Non-Profit Company that is governed by non-executive directors and supported by Advisory Trustees, as per its constitution. Silverstone Financial Solutions provides accounting, auditing and company secretarial services.

- Directors: Prof Willem Landman (Chair), Prof Joseph Raimondo, Lynne Grubb
- Advisory Trustees: Mark Heywood, Vuya Kabanyane Ilengou, Sean Davison, Janet Jobson

7. Public Profile

Collectively, our founders and Executive Committee members have published numerous:

- Peer-reviewed articles worldwide
- Several book chapters, as well as
- Books

We have also participated in multiple conferences (providing talks or poster presentations and, in academic circles), our Chairperson, Professor Landman, has acted as an internal and external examiner for PhD, MA and MPhil theses in Philosophy and Law on a range of topics related to end-of-life choices. He also teaches university courses in graduate programmes and lectures at local medical schools (Pretoria, Wits, Free State, KZN, Stellenbosch and UCT) as well as internationally.

DignitySA actively uses its social media and other platforms to share news, stories, and insights related to end-of-life choices and assisted dying, aiming to foster broader public support and understanding. To date, our organisation has been featured extensively in print and electronic media. We have engaged in 200 interviews (approximately 160 for radio and 40 for television) and more recently podcasts as well. In May 2025 we initiated a newsletter called Digity Matters and in September 2025 we launched our own podcast series, entitled *A Way To Go*.

8. Conclusion

DignitySA is a well-established, reputable organisation with a clear vision and mission, a robust governance structure, and a consistent record of advocacy in the field of end-of-life care in South Africa. Its work is grounded in the principles of compassion, dignity, and respect for individual autonomy, and it continues to play a leading role in shaping the national discourse and legal framework regarding end-of-life choices.