

I Must Die, My Love, To Rid You of this Burden
by Sarah-Kate Templeton, Health Editor, London Sunday Times
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The widow of a leading physicist has told how her brilliant husband chose to die at a suicide clinic in Switzerland because he could not live with dementia and the thought that he was becoming an increasing burden on her.

The professor of petroleum engineering, who was knighted for his services to research, wanted his wife, Ann, to be free to enjoy the life she had missed out on while caring for him for eight years as his condition deteriorated, she said.

Ann, who wishes the couple to be known only by their first names, said her 83-year old husband, John, had told her: You are much younger than me; you have had no life since I've been really bad. There are precious years that you have missed. You haven't had a day out with our daughters for years. Why should you be looking after me? I am going to get so bad I won't know who I am.

Ann said the couple's three daughters were devastated by the decision. John asked each one to come and talk to him. It was harrowing for them, but they understood. He had to say goodbye to them. They knew he wasn't coming back.

Ann accompanied John to the Dignitas clinic, near Zurich, where he died on March 22. He was determined to die and, having lived with him through his illness, she knew she had to help.

John was so desperate, she said. You have to live with someone to see how really ill they can be.

Ann first realised something was seriously wrong with her husband's memory when he struggled with his speech and with the names of his peers, who had gathered to honour his career at a dinner at Imperial College London in 2004. People had come from all over the world. He recognised them but couldn't put a name to their faces.

John, from the southeast of England, chose not to use the title - Sir - after he was knighted. He thought it was such a big fuss, Ann said. He was a professor of physics but never used that title either.

His dementia worsened and he also suffered a ministroke and physical ailments including heart and kidney problems, pains and stiffness around the shoulders and neck.

In September last year he tried, unsuccessfully, to take his own life at home in bed with an overdose of paracetamol and sleeping tablets. He was rushed to

hospital, where he suffered what Ann describes as appalling care. The fear of being taken into hospital again or going into a nursing home convinced John that he had to end his life, Ann said. He said, I have not worked hard all my life to spend money on expensive nursing homes.

John decided to go to Dignitas when he found himself unable to write a Christmas card to Ann, telling her how much he loved her. One of his daughters found him crying with frustration. That was what broke him, Ann said.

She and John contacted Friends At The End, a support group for people considering assisted dying, which advised them about applying to Dignitas. Initially, John was refused by Dignitas, but Michael Irwin, a retired GP and co-ordinator of the Society for Old Age Rational Suicide, put the couple in touch with a psychiatrist, who stated that John was able to give his consent to die.

The night before John's death, the couple went out to dinner. He was at peace, Ann said. The next day they took a taxi to the clinic, where John died on the morning of March 22, propped up in bed, with Ann at his side.

For Ann, the worst part was leaving her dead husband in Switzerland and flying home alone. She wants the law changed so people can choose to die in Britain without needing to go to Switzerland.

Irwin said: John decided that his progressive, incurable dementia would place an unbearable burden on both himself and his family. His competent decision to have a doctor-assisted suicide in Switzerland was a sensible one - a view shared by 70% of adults in the UK, according to an ICM national opinion poll in March.