THE news that Brisbane Customs recently seized copies of the Peaceful Pill Handbook should be a wake-up call. How could we have allowed the Government to make it illegal to discuss end-of-life options, to close down debate over euthanasia in this draconian fashion?

My baby boomer generation is now in the thick of it. As our ageing parents grow frail and die, many of us have been forced to witness awful, undignified ends for the people we love most. We have watched helplessly as they died in mental and physical agony, little by little.

My strong, wonderful mother had a living will and was determined to avoid the fate of so many of her friends. At 87, she had witnessed so many people die and dreaded spending her final days helpless and in misery.

Yet that is just what happened. She had a fall, broke her hip and ended up in surgical recovery ward. But then, she had a pulmonary embolism which should have delivered the fast, peaceful death she so wanted. She lingered for two horrible weeks.

Everything went wrong. She screamed every time the nurses turned her over. She's just afraid of falling again, the nurses assured me. It tore me apart.

But then a palliative care nurse happened to fix things. She had her moved to a ward which had proper palliative care, arranged for higher morphine levels, less regular turning. But then she got terrible diarrhoea which led to more pain, intrusion, endless assaults on her dignity.

It was devastating struggling so ineffectually to provide that peaceful death my mother so deserved. Here I was, an educated, assertive person, thoroughly familiar with the medical system having for many years taught doctors and medical students. Yet I failed dismally. Wandering the hospital corridors with me were other families crushed by their impotence to ease their parents' suffering.
It is a total nonsense to suggest the solution to a peaceful, dignified death is now available through palliative care. Yes, this care can make a huge difference. But many, perhaps most, of the elderly die in nursing homes and normal hospital wards, often cared for by people who lack the skills to provide that care. And palliative care experts do acknowledge that even with state-of-the-art palliative care, terminally ill patients can still experience distressing symptoms that make their lives unbearable -- weakness, breathlessness, nausea, suffocation, psychological distress, confusion.

Our community knows this -- Morgan Research shows less than a quarter of people polled believe palliative care is sufficient for terminally ill patients. The vast majority (more than 70 per cent) of us want laws changed to allow doctors to provide assistance to terminally ill patients to commit suicide, and to be able, where appropriate, to give lethal doses to such patients.

Yet we continue to allow a noisy minority to lean on politicians and prevent Australia from providing the legal support for assisted suicide available in other parts of the world -- Oregon, Switzerland, The Netherlands -- well-functioning legal systems which have not resulted in the dire consequences predicted by the doomsayers.

The shameful result is old people in Australia are choosing to try to end their lives in the most horrific ways, often unsuccessfully, with the result they spend their final days with even greater levels of pain, disability and despair, as a consequence of their failure.

My friends often joke about shooting each other when the time comes. But we will face the same dismal end-of-life prospects as many of our parents unless we get moving now. The noisy, activist baby boomer generation should have what it takes to turn this issue around.

Forty years ago we were demanding control over our bodies, a greater say in our medical care. Surely we are not going to allow politicians to ban books which simply talk rationally about control over the final days we spend in these bodies.

Death with dignity is a vital issue for baby boomers, writes Bettina Arndt

Old people are choosing to end their lives in the most horrific ways

Bettina Arndt is a social commentator and writer.

If you or an elderly relative need urgent help contact Lifeline’s 24-hour help line on 131 114 or the Crisis Counselling Service on 1300 363 622

Caption: Colour artwork showing a old and grey hand being crossed by an arm holding a pill in an open palm.
Illus: Artwork

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2. Euthanasia debate ignites

Author: Jonathan King
Date: 27/09/2006
Sydney Morning Herald

ON THIS DAY: 1996

EMOTIONS spilt over in the euthanasia debate, with the deputy prime minister, Tim Fischer, declaring the first mercy killing under Northern Territory law the beginning of a “culture of death” and MPs saying a bill overruling the law might be blocked in the Senate. Bob Dent, who had prostate cancer, had become the first person in the world to die under euthanasia legislation the previous Sunday.

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3. Battling for the right to die with a little dignity

Sunshine Coast Daily
Saturday, September 23, 2006

As Amanda Vanstone calls for euthanasia laws, Coast supporters rally in memory of Bob Dent, the first man to die legally in Australia

10 years on and many are still battling for the right to die with a little dignity

TEN years ago this week, a terminally-ill man in Darwin chose to take his own life. But he did it legally.
Freedom of Choice supporters, in favour of voluntary euthanasia, staged a Memorial Day at Cotton Tree for that man, Bob Dent. Bob was the first person in the world to die using the Rights of the Terminally Ill Act which legalised euthanasia in the
Northern Territory on July 1, 1996.
The Act was then overturned on March 15,1997.

Bob's wife, Judy, attended the day to re-iterate her husband's right to die with dignity at a time of his choosing.

Bob was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1991, and after surviving numerous operations, he had lost 25kg and was forced to wear a catheter and leg bag and was suffering severe pain when he chose to die on September 22, 1996, she said.

"Even if I didn't believe in voluntary euthanasia, I would still have let him go ahead with it because of the state he was in and the pain he was suffering," Judy said.

News Makers
Judy Dent

Gold Coast bowel-cancer sufferer Nancy Crick also refused to live with her terminal illness, choosing to die surrounded by 21 family and friends on May 22, 2002.

Tewantin woman Bron Norman, daughter of Australian author Nancy Cato, witnessed Nancy's death.

"People need to realise death is a valid option when life is unbearable," she said.
"I was drawn to Nancy because my mother's name was Nancy and she died in 2000 after a month of severe pain and I could do nothing to help her.
"I failed my mother and I wanted to help Nancy ... it didn't worry me a bit if I was breaking the law."

She said Nancy Crick was "very ill" and just 30kg when she decided to take her life.

Bron described Nancy as a "motherly" figure who, despite her pain, always took time to greet her guests with a "hug and a kiss and offered to make them a cup of tea".
"On her final night, she had all her good friends there, and Nancy was being the hostess and then at 8pm she said she was going to bed and kissed everyone, saying 'good night', not 'good bye',' she said.

Bron said rather than sad, Nancy's friends felt a sense of triumph that this frail, elderly lady had taken control of her life by ending it.

Yesterday, a senior federal government minister used the 10-year anniversary to call for the practice to be sanctioned across the country.
Immigration Minister Amanda Vanstone says her views on assisted suicide for the terminally ill have not changed since Mr Dent died.

Senator Vanstone said people close to death should be able to choose how they go. "I think people should have the choice to take the final step of their life - that is to die - with some dignity and grace. We need euthanasia laws. "There's a fine line between what keeps someone calm and comfortable and

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4. Time for mercy on euthanasia

EDITORIAL
Saturday, September 23, 2006
IN OUR OPINION
Sunshine Coast Daily

AMANDA Vanstone has never been hailed for her compassion but she certainly makes some valid points in calling for euthanasia laws in Australia.

Ten years after Australia's first legal voluntary euthanasia of cancer sufferer Bob Dent in the Northern Territory, Mrs Vanstone yesterday called for the right for people to choose how they go to be enshrined in legislation.

"I think someone who's facing the end of their life should have the choice as to how that proceeds," she said.
"I think people should have the choice to take the final step of their life - that is to die - with some dignity...
"We need euthanasia laws. There are doctors who are quite sensible who can see someone very near the end of their life and make sure that they are calm and comfortable during that time.
"There's a fine line between what keeps someone calm and comfortable and what hastens their death and I don't think the doctors who are prepared to keep someone calm and comfortable should ever be at risk and we need laws that make that clear to protect them as well."

The reality is that euthanasia is happening every day in our hospitals, nursing homes and at private homes.

Those involved should be able to proceed, as long as it in the best interests of the person concerned, without fear of prosecution.

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5. Anniversary of life versus dogma

Sunshine Coast Daily
Saturday, September 23, 2006

THIS Friday is the 10th anniversary of the death of Bob Dent in Darwin. Bob was 66 and the first person to exercise his right to die under the Northern Territory's Rights of the Terminally Ill Act.
Bob (above suffered from terminal prostate cancer, was in pain and needed constant care. After meeting all the requirements of the Act, he pressed a button to end his life. He went to sleep within 30 seconds and died within 10 minutes.

The day before he said: "If you don't agree with euthanasia then don't use it, but don't deny me the right to use it if and when I want to."
Today, nobody in Australia can do what Bob did, thanks to Howard Government minister Kevin Andrews who introduced legislation in Canberra to override the NT laws. Andrews, driven by his Christian principles, is pretty good at forcing his view on the rest of us - just look at his IR laws.

"We can humanely put down our pets but must watch humans suffer on the slim chance that the Christian God somehow demands it".

**CAPTION:**
FLYING THE FLAG: Bob Dent's wife Judy makes sure his legacy is not forgotten.

We can humanely put down our pets but must watch humans suffer what hastens their death and I don't think the doctors who are prepared to keep someone calm and comfortable should ever be at risk and we need laws that make that clear to protect them as well."

But she did not condone people breaking the law to help end someone's life.

I think in the area of euthanasia there's a (compulsion) for some to think that it might be a moral thing to do to help someone against the law and I don't think it is," she said.

"It is a moral position to break the law and take the consequences when you disagree with it and Nelson Mandela's a good example of that. Mahatma Ghandi's another example.

"But never confuse that with someone who chooses to break the law and hides the fact that they've done it - to somehow hide from the police and others what you've done."

-SAM BENGER and AAP

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**6. New Orleans doc denies mercy killings**

The Age
New Orleans
September 25, 2006 - 1:30PM

A New Orleans doctor accused of killing patients in the chaos following Hurricane Katrina has defended herself and two nurses who remained in the flooded hospital with no electricity to care for the ill.

Two months after Louisiana's attorney general accused doctor Anna Maria Pou and the nurses of committing murder by giving lethal injections of painkillers to at least four elderly patients, formal charges have not been laid.

In that time, Pou and nurses Cheri Landry and Lori Budo have been featured in sympathetic articles in both People magazine and the local newspaper.

They deny all wrongdoing and on Sunday, Pou stood her ground for the first time publicly on CBS television.

"I did not murder those patients," Pou said in an interview on the news program 60 Minutes. "I spent my entire life taking care of patients. Why would I suddenly start murdering people?"

State Attorney General Charles Foti has accused the three women of "playing God" by systematically giving lethal overdoses to four seriously ill patients.

He says the murder allegations against Pou and the nurses were corroborated by forensic evidence and eye witnesses.

Pou admits injecting Memorial Medical Centre patients with painkillers, but only to reduce discomfort.
"I do not believe in euthanasia," said Pou, an ear, nose and throat surgeon who specialises in cancer treatment. "I don't think that it is anyone's decision to make when a patient dies. However what I do believe in is comfort care. And that means that we assure that they do not suffer pain," she told CBS.

The case is winding through a criminal justice system that is still disjointed one year after the flooding.

New Orleans Coroner Frank Minyard is still evaluating toxicology reports and other evidence in the case he received on September 7, chief coroner's investigator John Gagliano said on Friday.

The district attorney is expected to present the case to a grand jury, a group of citizens who will then determine whether to formally charge Pou and her co-defendants.

The attorney general had no doubt. "This is not euthanasia. This is plain and simple homicide," Foti told 60 Minutes.

While Pou said that what she administered were painkillers, "When you use both of them together, it becomes a lethal cocktail and guarantees they're going to die," Foti told CBS.

Few here believe the charges, and prefer to view the three women as heroes who cared for hundreds of patients trapped in a sweltering hospital with no electricity, running water or garbage removal.

AFP

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7. Execution method not good enough for a dog, experts say

San Francisco Chronicle
SAN JOSE

Bob Egelko, Chronicle Staff Writer
Wednesday, September 27, 2006

California's method of lethal injection isn't humane enough to use on a dog, medical witnesses testified Tuesday on behalf of a condemned murderer from Stockton who is challenging the constitutionality of the state's execution procedures.

"People deserve an execution that is as good as what's been done for animals," Dr. Mark Heath, a Columbia University anesthesiologist, said on the opening day of a scheduled four-day federal court hearing in San Jose.

Problems in prison leadership, training, attitudes and the drugs used to put the prisoner to death make it "inevitable that there will be, if there hasn't already been, an inhumane execution" causing "excruciating pain," said Heath, the chief expert witness called by lawyers for inmate Michael Morales.

Heath was preceded by a veterinarian and a pharmaceutical researcher, both of whom described the state's procedures as flawed and unreliable, and by three lawyers who saw their clients executed and described them apparently heaving and gasping for breath.

In rebuttal, the state's lawyer, Senior Assistant Attorney General Dane Gillette, said lethal injection in California "will result in a quick, painless death." He said evidence from past
executions shows that the prisoner is quickly rendered unconscious and remains that way during injection of the fatal drugs.

The hearing is the first of its kind in California and is being closely watched in other states where lethal injection, the sole or preferred method of execution in 37 of the 38 death penalty states, is under legal attack.

Morales, 46, was convicted of raping and fatally beating 17-year-old Terri Winchell in a vineyard near Lodi in 1981. Courts have upheld his death sentence, but he won a stay of execution from U.S. District Judge Jeremy Fogel on Feb. 21 after prison officials were unable to enlist doctors or other medical personnel to monitor the execution.

Fogel said at the time that records of six of the 11 lethal injections performed in California since 1996 contained indications that a sedative, injected at the outset to cause unconsciousness, may not have been working properly. He called the hearing to determine whether the state's procedures pose a significant risk of causing extreme pain, in violation of the constitutional ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

"It's inaccurate to say that an execution has to be painless," Fogel said at the outset of Tuesday's session, adding that there was no way to compare the pain an execution may cause and the agony suffered by a murder victim. Nonetheless, he noted, "the Constitution forbids punishment which inflicts severe degrees of pain."

The main issue Fogel must resolve is whether the state's procedures contain adequate safeguards against a failure of anesthesia that would leave the prisoner conscious during the injections of paralyzing and heart-stopping drugs. There is no conclusive evidence that inmates have been in pain during past executions, but eyewitnesses Tuesday said they saw signs of distress.

"After a few minutes, his chest and stomach started to heave against the restraints," actions that lasted four to five minutes before they subsided, said Margo Rocconi, an assistant federal public defender who saw her client, Stephen Wayne Anderson, executed at San Quentin in January 2002.

Two defense lawyers from North Carolina, which uses a sedative dosage comparable to California's, offered similar descriptions. Attorney Heather Jarvis said her client, Edward Hartman, shook violently and his throat pulsed wildly during his October 2003 execution. Cindy Adcock said her client, Willie Fisher, appeared to be gasping for breath for about 10 minutes when he was executed in March 2001.

William Ebling, a pharmaceutical researcher who works for a consulting company in Mountain View, testified that the procedure is inherently risky because of the fast-acting nature of sodium pentothal, the sedative used by California and all other states.

The drug dissipates so rapidly that surgical patients may regain consciousness in five to eight minutes after a standard clinical dose, which is why additional anesthesia is used during surgery, Ebling said. That effect is also possible during executions, he said, even though California uses a much higher dosage and is changing its procedures to provide a continuous flow of the sedative during the execution.

Another expert witness, Kevin Concannon, a veterinary anesthesiologist from North Carolina, said the drugs used in lethal injection are potentially painful and the procedure lacks safeguards he uses in his practice, such as keeping in direct contact with animals undergoing anesthesia or euthanasia. The drugs at San Quentin are delivered through intravenous tubing from another room.

"I would not use that protocol in veterinary patients, nor would I recommend it," Concannon said.

E-mail Bob Egelko at begelko@sfchronicle.com.
JAIPUR: A 60-year-old Jain woman, who was on a terminal fast which she said, was sanctioned by the faith's Santhara tradition, which is close to euthanasia, died on Thursday after refusing to touch food for 14 days.

Vimla Devi Bhansali was suffering from an incurable brain tumour and doctors and hospitals had given up on her. She was cremated at the Adarsh Nagar cremation ground where large number of persons belonging to the Shwetambar Jain community attended her funeral.

For the final journey, Bhansali was dressed in a colourful sari and her body kept in squat position, as the funeral procession moved from Ram Niwas Bagh to the cremation ground.

Community members queued up in large numbers to console Sohan Lal Bhansali, the husband of the Vimla Devi. The police did not take any action against Vimla Devi and her family members for practising Santhara.

Community leaders insisted that Santhara was a Jain tradition, practiced for thousand of years, and Vimla Devi committed no crime by embracing death through Santhara.

Her husband refused to comment saying that he was in mourning and it was not fit to say anything at this stage.

A PIL against Santhara is pending before the Rajasthan High Court and the hearing was fixed for October 5 after the court issued notices to the Union government and the state government along with two Shwetambar Jain social bodies.

The PIL filed by advocate Nikhil Soni questioned the Santhara practice on grounds that it was akin to suicide or mercy killing, which were prohibited by law.

The court said in its order that the petitioner could pursue the case with the Jaipur east police, seeking its help in the matter.

After getting the order, Jaipur east superintendent of police sought legal opinion on the matter. However, Vimla Devi died before a plan of action could be chalked out.

The petitioner's counsel Madhav Mitra blamed the police for Vimla Devi's death, saying that it was a case of sheer negligence on their part for not stopping a ritual that encouraged people to commit suicide.

Mitra said the state government would not have to explain why preventive action was not taken even though the police received court orders a week before Vimla Devi's death.

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