



[BMJ](#). 2004 May 15; 328(7449): 1204.

PMCID: PMC411115

## Huibert Drion

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### Short abstract

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Dutch Supreme Court judge who became a leading advocate of euthanasia

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“It appears to me... that many old people would find great reassurance if they could have a means to end their lives in an acceptable way at the moment that to them... appears suitable.” It was with these words that Huib Drion, then a 74 year old former Supreme Court judge and professor of civil law, entered Dutch social history and became internationally renowned as a supporter of individual rights to suicide. Drion gave voice to a thread of Dutch opinion and sparked a debate that has outlived his death in his sleep at home in Leiden, apparently of natural causes, aged 86 on 20 April.

A learned lawyer, Drion was moved to write, almost as an intellectual exercise, after an elderly family member expressed concern at the prospect of ending her days in a nursing home. His article, “The self-chosen end for old people,” appeared in the Dutch national newspaper *NRC Handelsblad* in 1991. He argued that people aged 75 or over, living alone, should have the choice of being provided by a doctor with the means to end their lives at a time and manner that was acceptable to them. This, he felt, would offer older people the knowledge that they could choose to die before experiencing the final stages of decline and dependence.

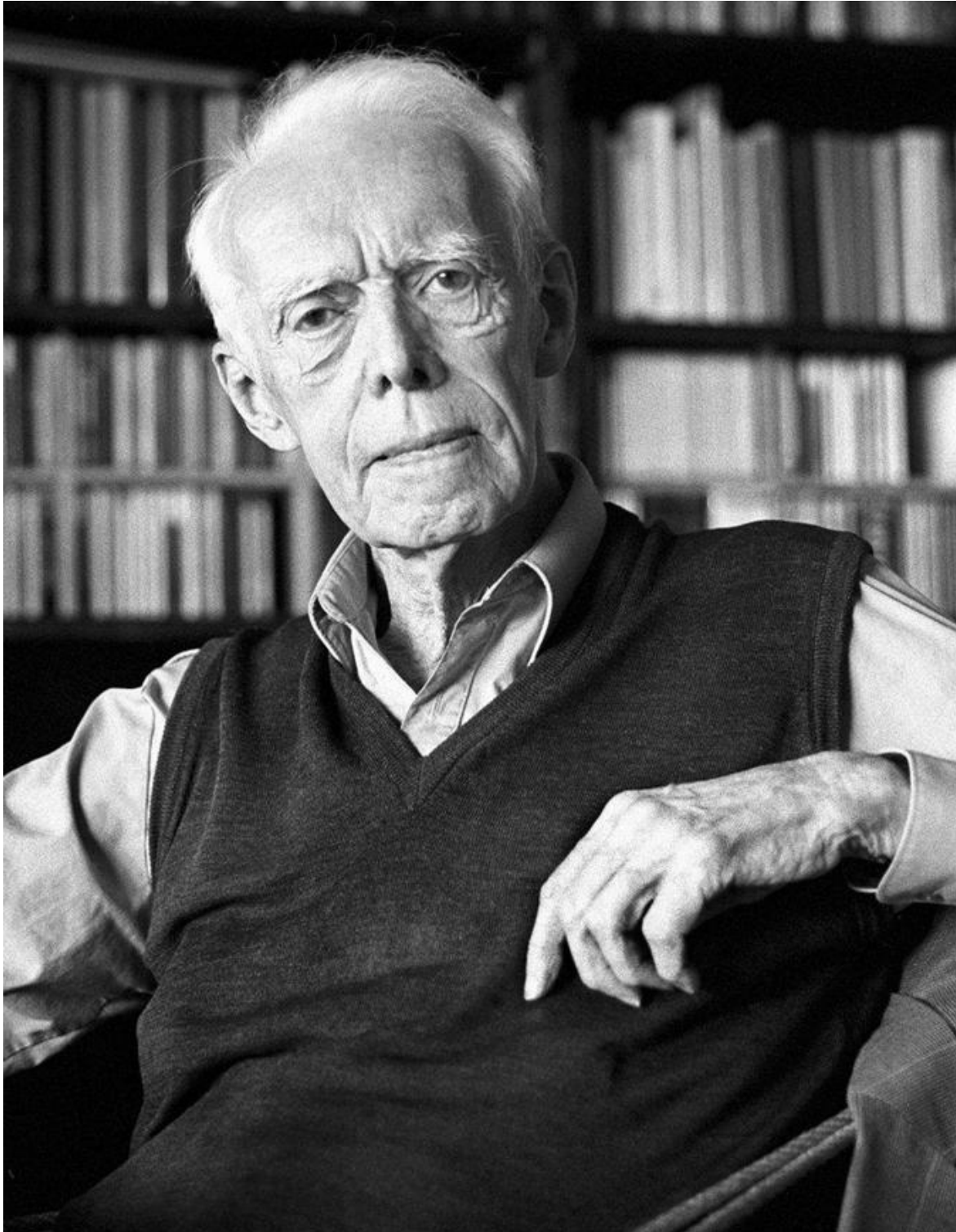
The autonomy from any real medical involvement set it starkly apart from the euthanasia debate then raging in the Netherlands, where a doctor's adherence to a range of requirements stood central. The Rummelink committee of inquiry into euthanasia that was to pave the way towards legislation published its findings in September 1991. Drion asked for his article to be held back so as to avoid confusion. He saw his proposal as a social rather than a medical one.

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Figure 1



Credit: PA/ANP

When his article appeared his ideas found fertile ground, being said to have put into words what many people were thinking. The *NRC Handelsblad* unusually published letters for several weeks. Drion received hundreds of letters, and requests for interviews and speaking engagements where, he is said to have commented mischievously, he could see mainly “light-grey-haired elderly ladies.”

While he was surprised by the intellectual debate that he had triggered, Drion also welcomed it. He never objected to the media coining the phrase “Drion's pill”—a concept rather than an actual suicide pill—and frequently gave interviews. But he avoided saying whether or not he would take advantage of it: “I do not know if I would use it, you know, because I am a coward.”

He was not a coward, however. Even before writing his controversial editorial he had not been afraid to address dangerous subjects if he believed that they were right. Born in 1917, one of six children of a Dutch right wing liberal party MP, Drion studied law at Leiden University in 1938, when the Netherlands was split between supporters and opponents of national socialism. He led the Leiden Committee of Vigilance, a group of intellectuals opposing Nazi propaganda, and during the later occupation co-wrote a resistance newspaper with his brother Jan.

After the second world war an exemplary legal career saw him become professor of civil law at Leiden University and between 1981 and 1984 deputy president of the Supreme Court. However, it was as an incisive thinker concerned with social issues that he found notoriety.

His views have been durable, winning the support of former health minister Els Borst and shaping the new objectives of the Dutch Right to Die society (NVVL), of which he was a figurehead and honorary member since 1997.

Since euthanasia has been effectively decriminalised the NVVL has moved on to campaign for a “last will pill.” NVVL chief executive officer Rob Jonquière said many members saw the self determination in Drion's ideas as the core of the issue. “People want the right to choose to end their life independent of doctors or illness.”

Drion's views go far beyond the boundaries, set by today's euthanasia law and promoted by the Royal Dutch Medical Association (KNMG). However, Professor Johan Legemaate, the association's coordinator of legal policy, said that many doctors felt “some sympathy” for Drion's views, not least because he chose not to lay the burden on doctors' shoulders.

A study last year found that 25% of doctors supported the view that older people should be provided with the means to end their lives at a moment of their choice; 56% opposed it.

*Huibert Drion, former Dutch supreme court judge and professor of civil law Leiden University, the Netherlands (b 1917), d 20 April 2004.*

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