

# What it feels like...

## to help someone to die



TIMOTHY ALLEN

**Name** Heather Pratten  
**Age** 67  
**History** In 2000, Pratten helped her son Nigel to die. She later pleaded guilty to 'aiding and abetting a suicide' and was given a one-year conditional discharge. For more information about assisted dying, go to [www.dignityin-dying.org.uk](http://www.dignityin-dying.org.uk)

**M**y son Nigel saw his father suffer with Huntingdon's disease [a hereditary nervous-system disorder that causes physical and mental debilitation, and for which there is no cure]. From that time he said, "If I ever get this, I will not go the whole distance."

He lived his life as he wanted. He loved to draw: he used to draw cartoons. He always drew us birthday cards, Christmas cards, and then one year I got a shop-bought card and I knew that he couldn't draw properly any longer, and that the disease was taking hold. I tried to talk to him, but he wouldn't discuss it.

One day he told me he was going to see his friend in Scotland and that I wasn't to go to his flat. But I was worried so I kept phoning him. After a few days the phone was picked up. He just said "help me". When I got there I could see that he'd been trying to starve

himself. He'd bought drink to keep himself out of it. I called an ambulance and they took him to hospital; he wasn't very happy with that. He said, "When I said 'help me', I meant get me some more drink. I would have been dead in another couple of weeks."

After that we talked more and saw a lot of each other. He wasn't in pain, it was just the knowledge that this disease took 20 years to kill you, and he was half-way. His legs were going, his speech was becoming slurred, he was choking when he ate – he knew his life was shutting down. And the fact that he couldn't draw was awful to him, because he'd always walked about with a pencil in his hand. We talked about his dying. We discussed all aspects of it. We got very close because we talked about things that parents and children shouldn't talk about.

As time went on, he was spending more and more time in hospital. On his 42nd birthday, I picked him up. He told me he wanted to cook a meal at his flat, but when we got there he said "this is what I want for my birthday". Someone, I presume one of his friends, had given him some heroin and a syringe.

I didn't really have a problem with that, compared with some of the other dreadful ways we'd discussed. The problem was we weren't too sure how to inject it, and in the end he just swallowed the lot. Then we lay down and talked about his childhood, his friends, what sort of life he'd had. Eventually we fell asleep.

I woke up four hours later. I knew he was nearly dead because his face was really white; his lips were blue and he was only taking a breath now and again. I was worried someone would miss us and come to the flat and I thought "I can't let him fail", so I picked up the pillow and put it over his face.

When it was all over, the only feeling I had was relief: he'd got what he desperately wanted. I would have loved to have been able to ask the medical profession for help. But I've never felt guilty about it, I've never regretted it, because I just know it was the right thing for him. *Joanna Caird*