

‘My 33-year-old anorexic daughter died by euthanasia – my husband and I stood by her’

Esther Beukema pursued her ‘death wish’ after battling an eating disorder. Her parents argue why they supported her – and others like her

Abigail Buchanan 7 April 2024 • 11:00am



Ellen, Esther and Rob Beukema in October 2021 CREDIT: c/o Ellen Beukema

The weeks before 33-year-old Esther Beukema died were the happiest of her adult life. When the day came, on 10 December 2021, she wore a jumper printed with a picture of Mickey Mouse giving a thumbs up and odd socks – one her mother’s and one her father’s.

At 2.30pm, she got into bed in her childhood bedroom, which has bright-pink walls and a framed print of Winnie the Pooh. She lay in her mother’s arms, while her father and younger brother sat at her feet, as a nurse administered a lethal dose of a drug through a needle in her arm.

Five minutes later, she was gone.

Esther had been campaigning for her own death for more than a decade. Since she was diagnosed with anorexia nervosa at the age of 18, she had wanted to be ‘zero on the scale’. Often she told her mother Ellen this, adding, ‘I don’t want to exist.’ Ellen delivers this statement matter-of-factly – but Esther’s openness about her ‘death wish’ was ‘sometimes shocking for other people’, she concedes.

By the time she died, Esther had made numerous attempts to take her own life. To her mother, a retired neonatal nurse, a medically assisted death seemed humane in comparison.

Her father, Rob, a retired businessman, found it harder to accept – he thought there must be a therapy that could help her, a treatment they hadn’t tried. Their differing views put a huge strain on their marriage. ‘As a dad, I tried to show Esther a little bit of blue sky... that there’s always hope,’ he says. ‘That tomorrow, perhaps it will be better.’



Esther with her father Rob, who initially found it harder to accept his daughter's decision

CREDIT: c/o Ellen Beukema

Over the years, Rob sought therapy, and by the time of Esther's death he says he was 'at peace' with it too.

'She didn't have to die alone, she was with the people she loved,' Ellen says. 'And that is what you want for everyone.'

In the Netherlands, where the Beukemas live, euthanasia for mental illness has been a reality for more than 20 years. Under the Dutch Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act of 2002, euthanasia and assisted suicide (in which a physician provides the drug and the patient self-administers) are legal for psychiatric as well as physical conditions, provided the doctors believe the patient's suffering is 'unbearable with no prospect of improvement' and there is 'no reasonable alternative'.

Prominent campaigners such as Dame Esther Rantzen, who has stage-four cancer and has registered with the Swiss assisted-dying clinic Dignitas, have recently renewed calls for a parliamentary vote on assisted dying in the UK, too. But Rantzen draws the line at using it to end psychiatric suffering. 'We need very clear parameters,' she has previously said. 'I don't think we can go into the area of mental suffering. I think that obviously it can be intense, as real as physical suffering, but it's too difficult to define.'



Esther Rantzen has campaigned for access to euthanasia in the UK, but believes it should not be used to end mental suffering CREDIT: Getty

Ellen believes otherwise. She was broadly understanding of Esther's quest for euthanasia from the start, despite her daughter's young age. 'It's not the length of life, it's the quality of life that's more important,' she says. Deep down, she feared Esther would die regardless.

Today, at the family home in Soest, less than an hour from Amsterdam, traces of Esther are everywhere. Her name is on a plaque by the front door, along with those of her parents and three younger siblings. When asked how many children she has, Ellen says 'four'.

Sitting in the living room, she points out a bronze statue on a bookshelf in the corner – an outstretched palm with six butterflies fluttering out, one for each member of the family. The glittering orange one, she explains, represents Esther. A custom-made quilt is on the back of the sofa, covered with pictures of Esther, charting her life from a newborn to her 30s.



Ellen with the custom quilt memorialising her late daughter CREDIT: Carla van de Puttelaar

Ellen has a warm, practical manner, and is businesslike even in the face of a mother's worst nightmare. She and Rob are Christians, she tells me, as was Esther. They spent years praying for a miracle, but none came. 'Esther and we believe she is in a better place. She was always struggling here in this life.'

It is with Esther's blessing that they are telling her story today. Partly because they believe the secrecy surrounding discussions of end-of-life decisions can be damaging. But mainly to keep her memory alive. 'If you don't talk about her, then she doesn't exist any more,' says Ellen. 'Then she is really dead.'

There was no indication of Esther's illness in her early childhood, which was a happy one. She grew up in a busy, middle-class household, her siblings all close in age. She did well at primary school, learnt to play the piano and took part in gymnastics competitions.

The first signs of the illness emerged in adolescence. 'She found it difficult to move on to secondary school.' She was a perfectionist and prone to introspection. As her mother puts it, she did 'everything within'. She also struggled to make friends.

'It was very difficult for our family... We saw she was a little bit quiet, but we have a very hectic family, with four kids.'



Esther, her parents and her siblings on a walk two weeks before she died CREDIT: c/o Ellen Beukema

At first Esther said she wanted to eat a bit more ‘healthily’ – but according to her diaries, which she later shared with her psychiatrist for research purposes, Esther started visiting calorie-counting websites in the summer of 2005, aged 17.

She was diagnosed with anorexia in 2006. Later she was told she displayed the symptoms of borderline personality disorder, and doctors said it was likely she had autism. By 2007 she was severely malnourished, having lost a great deal of weight, and required hospital treatment. A grim cycle of force-feeding, weight gain and weight loss began.

After each hospital stay, Ellen recalls she would return more traumatised and depressed than before. ‘It was very difficult to understand what was happening in her head. She said, “I will eat to get myself out of the clinic”... and then she would come home, and we would start again, with the same problem.’

‘In the beginning, we all thought we could make Esther better,’ Ellen continues. ‘We went with all the power we had... trying to make her laugh, caring for her, consulting doctors. [They] also said it’s going to be OK. Not “OK”, but better. And I was reading a lot about anorexia, about eating disorders... to understand how she was thinking.’

In one nationally renowned clinic, she spent four months in solitary confinement; her parents say they were told this was necessary because Esther was suicidal. ‘We could visit her for 15 minutes [at a time] and there was always a nurse with us,’ says Ellen. ‘We were never alone with her.’

All the while Esther kept her diaries, filling them obsessively; her entries from her early illness are preoccupied with her desire to die. On Saturday 2 April, 2011, she wrote: ‘I just want to die. I don’t want to live any more. There’s nothing to it. Nowhere.’



Esther kept diaries throughout her life CREDIT: Carla van de Puttelaar

In 2012, she contacted the Euthanasia Expertise Centre (then called the End of Life Clinic) and requested euthanasia. Because she was not considered psychologically competent, her request was denied. Her cycle continued.

The treatments she underwent, say her parents, were counterproductive – Ellen claims that Esther picked up on other patients' techniques for hiding food, faking weight gain and deceiving nurses. She also believes that while many of the treatments helped her move towards a healthy weight temporarily, they failed to tackle the root causes of her illness.

In and out of closed psychiatric wards, she frequently absconded and would call her parents after running miles away. She also overdosed – Ellen believes this was because she wanted mental peace. 'Her head was always running and talking,' filled with 'bad voices' which said: 'You mustn't eat much, you must walk, you must do so many steps.'

Esther's parents hoped against hope that something would happen in the years following her initial request for euthanasia; that she would discover that life was worth living. But her illness was unrelenting.

A glimmer of hope came in 2017 when she fell in love with a fellow patient on a psychiatric ward. They lived together briefly on her release. 'We said, "Esther, maybe you should learn to live on your own before you live together," because we saw two people who are vulnerable,' says Ellen. 'But no, they [insisted].'

The pair found an apartment in nearby Amersfoort. They planned to get married. Her boyfriend was supportive, Ellen adds. Esther also got a cat, which she named Maan. For a few months, things improved.

The whole family went on holiday to Ghana, where Ellen and Rob support a charity. This was one of the 'little good times', says Ellen. 'But it didn't make her better.'

Two weeks before the wedding, Esther called it off, telling Ellen only: 'Maybe it's better that we don't.'

'We talked a lot about how she finds it so difficult to live. One time when I got her from the hospital, she said, "Mum, will it not be easier when I'm not around?" She felt she was too much,

too difficult for us. I said: “It would be very quiet. But we would miss you a lot, because we love you very much. But we can understand your desperation.”



'Her head was always running and talking': Esther Beukema, right, with her parents Rob and Ellen. By her late 20s, Esther 'couldn't do anything for herself'. And in 2019, after turning 30, she reapplied for euthanasia.

The total number of reported deaths from euthanasia (including assisted suicide) in the Netherlands has more than doubled over the past decade, from 4,188 in 2012 to 8,720 in 2022. When it was first legalised, cases involving psychiatric illness were few and far between compared with cases related to terminal physical illness. But in recent years that has changed and, though they are still a minority, the number has climbed from 14 in 2012 to 115 in 2021, the year of Esther's death, and the same again in the year that followed.

Euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide for psychiatric suffering is also legal in Belgium. In Canada, which legalised medical assistance in dying (MAID) in 2016, a debate on extending the criteria to include mental illness is ongoing. It was set to be legalised in March 2023, then March 2024, but that has now been postponed until at least 2027.

In the US, where MAID is legal in 11 states or districts, a controversial paper, co-authored by Dr Jennifer Gaudiani, the former medical director of an eating disorder centre in Colorado, and published in 2022, argued there was such a thing as 'terminal anorexia nervosa'. The paper made the case that some patients suffering from the condition should have access to MAID, where it is otherwise legal.

However, others have contested this. In 2019 American psychiatrist and bioethicist Scott Kim wrote that, 'compared with cases involving cancer or other terminal illnesses, the application of the eligibility criteria in psychiatric euthanasia depends much more on doctors' opinions'.

A diagnosis of terminal anorexia is, Kim believes, 'just made up... It's not a scientific criteria.'

But Esther's parents argue that a lack of understanding around euthanasia and assisted dying in the psychiatric profession exacerbates suffering. 'The education of doctors and psychiatrists needs to change,' Rob insists. 'Because they learn to get people better, they try to do that until the end.' But, as Ellen puts it, 'Sometimes people don't get better.'



Of her daughter's death, Ellen Beukema says: 'She didn't have to die alone...And that is what you want for everyone' CREDIT: Carla van de Puttelaar

Anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any psychiatric illness, from medical complications as a result of the disease and from suicide. Research suggests that just 46 per cent of anorexia patients recover fully – and some 20 per cent remain chronically ill.

Dutch guidelines for administering euthanasia for psychiatric illness are more stringent than those for physical illness, though many argue that they are not strict enough. In addition to a consultation with a doctor specially trained to assess euthanasia requests, the opinion of an independent psychiatrist is required.

A significant majority of these cases also involve the Euthanasia Expertise Centre in The Hague, a last chance saloon that takes patients who have been denied euthanasia by their physician (and indeed, many Dutch medics oppose it for mental illness).

Most of those who receive euthanasia for a psychiatric condition are women. Minors can also request it from the age of 12, but require parental permission until 16. Surprisingly, 16- and 17-year-olds don't need explicit parental permission, though their parents must be 'involved in the decision-making process'.

After Esther reapplied, Ellen drove her to see a psychiatrist called Menno Oosterhoff. In a book Oosterhoff has written along with pro-euthanasia psychiatrist Kit Vanmechelen, informed by excerpts from Esther's diaries, he admits it is difficult to determine whether a 'death wish' is the symptom of debilitating mental illness or, in fact, a logical consequence of an illness. And, he asks, if a death wish is regarded as a symptom, what if it is impossible to treat? This ethical quagmire deters many mental health professionals in the Netherlands from even discussing it.

Ellen can still remember the appointment with Oosterhoff. '[He] read about Esther's many years of illness, and he said to her, "The worst thing I can say to you now is that I have some options to make you better. I don't have any options, Esther."' He concluded that Esther was sound of mind and determined to die.

This time, her request was approved. Ellen felt only relief for her daughter.

The period that followed was the 'most beautiful' of Esther's illness, Ellen recalls. She made a calendar of those six weeks for Esther to fill with people she wanted to see and other things she wanted to do, but it remained empty. 'She wanted to stay at home.'

She moved back in with her parents, and every morning she would wake early, smoke a cigarette, then lie on their bed with them. They walked, drank coffee, watched feel-good Christmas movies, laughed together and talked and talked. 'In six weeks, we said everything,' says Ellen. 'We held her, we said we loved each other, we said, "Esther, it's OK."'



Esther with her father in the week before she died, which she spent at home with family CREDIT: c/o Ellen Beukema

Her siblings visited and Ellen recalls that they were able to ‘say everything they wanted to say to her’ too. It was also a little easier for her to eat, Ellen recalls, ‘although the eating disorder was always with her’.

The family drew some comfort from gallows humour: when Esther complained her mother had washed her soft toy monkey on too hot a cycle, Rob joked that it would be ‘far hotter when you’re cremated’.

She had wanted to visit Ghana again, but was too unwell. Instead Rob took her on an overnight trip to the beach.

Esther also planned her own funeral. First, she found a female-run funeral company that could provide a wicker casket rather than a traditional coffin, and a Mini instead of a hearse. She picked the music too: Easy on Me by Adele, Hallelujah by Jeff Buckley and Bring Me to the Water by Marco Borsato and Matt Simons, with the lyrics, ‘I’m ready to close my eyes / Steady and hold tight / I’m gonna be crossing over / To heaven and the great divide.’

When the time came, her sisters chose not to be in the room with her, though they had come to terms with her decision, but her brother was there with Ellen and Rob.

Ellen sang to her daughter – a bedtime prayer she had been singing to her children since they were small. Rob says she slipped away peacefully: ‘I saw her face. No anger. Very happy.’



Esther Beukema died in December 2021 CREDIT: c/o Ellen Beukema

Ellen, Rob and their three surviving children all have butterflies tattooed on their ankles in Esther’s memory. Butterflies became a recurring motif for her, Ellen explains, nodding to the bronze statue in the living room. Esther felt she was a caged insect, furiously flapping her wings against the confines of a life she found intolerable.

A box of hand-made paper butterflies also sits on the bookshelf, covered with messages to Esther from family and friends. She read these before she died, and they were pinned to her casket at her funeral. Ellen has been stoic throughout our interview, but when she reads out the messages, she starts to cry.

Esther's death, she says, has taught them, as a family, a lot about life. 'We are at peace with it, I think. For us, I think it's the feeling that there is a life before, and a life after. It's not that the life after is very bad, but you have to discover how to start again. You have to learn to see the good things and to enjoy them.'

But there are also some glimpses around the house of what could have been, had Esther lived. Upstairs, in Esther's bedroom, for example, is a miniature wood-craft home. It is a facsimile of the kind of apartment a 30-something city-dwelling woman might live in: a stylish maisonette with houseplants and a print of a New York skyline. She and Ellen made it together.



A shrine for the Esther in the Beukema household, where the empty jar signifies the released butterfly CREDIT: Carla van de Puttelaar

It is called 'Esther's house' – a tiny monument to the independent life she could have lived, if it had not been stolen by her eating disorder.

Ellen and Rob understand both sides of the arguments that rage on about the subject of medically assisted dying, despite being personally in favour. Ellen has started a charity with two other mothers called In Liefde Laten Gaan (Letting Go in Love), which supports about 90 parents whose (mostly adult) children have requested or received euthanasia due to mental illness; she campaigns for better understanding of assisted dying for psychiatric conditions.

But she is also at pains to point out that these patients – and Esther – should not be seen as statistics or pawns in a political argument. Esther was nothing more or less than a beloved daughter with a cruel disease.

'Esther feels like a butterfly in a jar,' Ellen says, still slipping into talking about her daughter in the present tense. 'She was born out of love, and we let her go in love.'