The moral and legal debate surrounding the permissibilty of euthanasia raises some extremely sensitive issues as to whether anyone ought to have the right to request to be killed, even if they think this is the only way to end their own suffering.

The disclosure by the Belgian Paralympic medal-winning athlete Marieke Vervoort

https://www.rt.com/sport/359065-belgian-paralympian-euthanasia-paralympics/

that she would have already committed suicide if she had not been able to make provision to undergo euthanasia has highlighted an interesting aspect of this debate. Although it does not tell us anything new with regard to the sorts of ethical arguments and concerns that euthanasia raises, it does help to dispel certain myths surrounding how and why someone may choose euthanasia.

Regardless of questions about whether euthanasia should be legal (it is in Vervoort's home country of Belgium), arguments as to the moral permissibility of (voluntary) euthanasia have primarily, although not exclusively, concerned two issues. One is whether actively shortening or ending someone's life could ever be in their best interests, usually on the grounds that their life is so terrible that they would be better off dead? The other is whether respecting the autonomy of an individual to make choices about their own life extends to a request to be killed?

Both of these lines of argument have been challenged by opponents of euthanasia. Authors such as Keown (2002) have argued from a position defending the sanctity of life, defending the view that a person's life is inviolable and of value regardless of disability, pain and suffering. This means that intentionally killing them can never be justified.

Supporters of euthanasia have rejected this sort of view by claiming it to be an unfair imposition of other people’s beliefs about where the value of life lies. Instead, they prefer to consider issues of the quality of life and, crucially, draw upon the second of the two major issues to support the right of an individual to determine whether their own life still has value to them and to choose the time and manner of their own death accordingly (Dworkin, 1993)

Although numerous different challenges to the autonomy argument for euthanasia have been made, one way opponents of euthanasia have responded to this appeal to respect individual autonomy has been to question the competence and freedom of choice of anyone making a request to end their lives in this way (Gordijn, Crul, & Zylicz, 2002). The thought is that anyone who finds themselves in a situation where they are requesting euthanasia is likely to have their ability to make rational judgements impaired through pain, emotional turmoil, depression, existential anguish, and so on, or be unaware of the options available to them for effective care. Therefore, so the argument goes, euthanasia cannot be justified by appeal to someone making a free, rational decision. The standard of decision required for it to be truly autonomous cannot be attained in these circumstances.

This sort of view might hold for some cases of those extremely near to death or suffering from impaired capacity but it seems extremely unlikely that it could hold true of everyone. The sort of pre-planning that Vervoort has undertaken is a good indication that this challenge to the rational state of someone requesting euthanasia may be very wide of the mark. Vervoort appears to be anything but incapable of rational judgement. Indeed, one of the crucial features of making a judgement in a case such as this is that it is not only an entirely voluntary and competent wish but also that it has a continuous or enduring basis - that it is not spur of the moment but rather a decision that has been deliberated and reflected upon.

Consider the reasons and circumstances behind Vevoort's decision. She has an incurable, degenerative spinal condition that causes great pain. She knows that it will continue to develop in such a way as to incapacitate her and result in terrible pain, thereby leaving her incapable of ending her own life should she find she wishes to do so. Far from being a cutting short of her life, the option of euthanasia is, for her, a means to extend her life in such a way as to avoid the need for suicide whilst she is still capable of acting without assistance from another. At the same time, the safeguards in place through the formalised legal system in Belgium permitting euthanasia allow her to maintain the vitally important opportunity to rescind the request at any time and for any reason prior to it. Vervoort’s situation illustrates how someone can be living an extremely full and successful life and yet still rationally want to choose euthanasia as a way of making sure they maintain control over their life in the knowledge that they do not want to continue to live under certain circumstances.