

End of Life Choice

Sept 22 2014

Newsletter on current debates: **medical case for voluntary euthanasia**

Advocates for **Palliative Care** and **Voluntary Euthanasia** share an interest in dignified dying, compassion for suffering, and concern for quality of life. The complementarity between palliative care and voluntary euthanasia is confirmed in the words of Emeritus Prof Ian Maddocks, first President of Palliative Care Australia, and Senior Australian of the Year in 2013: when stating his support for the decriminalisation of assisted death, he said "it calls for the same full appreciation as palliative care physicians seek to bring to their work".
(Australia 21 Roundtable Report, April 2013)



Surveys of patients in hospices and palliative care units show that even with state-of-the-art palliative care, most terminally ill patients experience substantial physical and existential suffering which cannot be eliminated. A person may experience extreme suffering through the indignity of loss of independence and personal control. Pain and loss of independence are important reasons people request euthanasia. About 5 to 10% of hospice patients persistently request euthanasia.

In some cases, suffering can only be "palliated" by administering sedatives to diminish consciousness. This may continue for days until eventually dehydration and circulatory collapse, or the retention of bronchial secretions and respiratory failure, causes death. From many points of view such sedation is unsatisfactory: it is without conscious benefit to the patient and is distressing for family and carers.

The choice of voluntary euthanasia should be a legally available option when palliative care cannot, or can no longer, meet a patient's needs. It can be regarded as a final act of palliative care.



Medical Opinion on End of Life: In eight published surveys and academic papers since 1987 examining attitudes and practice of doctors in Australia in relation to end of life treatment, the majority of doctors favour legislative change to allow voluntary euthanasia. In the most recent 2007 study, a survey of 854 Victorian doctors found

- 53% supported the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, and
- of doctors who have experienced requests from patients to hasten death, 35% have administered drugs with the intention of hastening death.

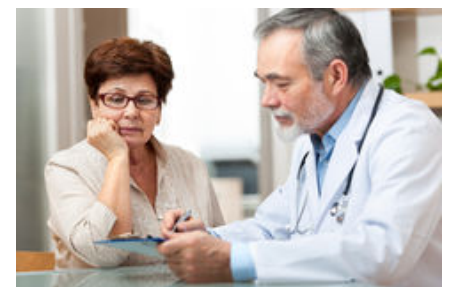
Despite the stated opposition of the federal AMA, Dr Andrew Miller, Vice President of the AMA in WA, referred to *the legitimate aspects of the euthanasia debate that are complex ones that people with terminal illnesses should be entitled to discuss with their caring health professionals who know them well.* *(ABC News 24, July 24, 2014).*

Few, if any, medical schools require their students to take the original form of the **Hippocratic Oath**. The oaths required by medical schools vary from none at all, to edited statements which reveal their historic origins, to modern

statements that bear no resemblance to the original oath.

Despite this, the injunction to 'do no harm' is cited by some medical practitioners as a justification for opposing assisted dying. However many medical procedures do induce harm as an accepted part of the treatment, and doctors often need to evaluate harms and benefits before advising a course of action. Although doctors are expert advisors it is the patient who should make the ultimate decision on which treatment, or none, represents the greater benefit and lesser harm. An incurably ill patient with unremitting suffering may decide, after consultation and advice, that a peaceful death is the lesser harm.

The challenge of voluntary euthanasia for the medical profession is evident in a **Personal plea for assisted dying** from Canadian infectious diseases specialist, Dr Donald Low. Dr Low managed the SARS crisis in Canada



in 2003, and in 2013, eight days before his death from a brain tumour, filmed an appeal for the right to assisted dying. He stated he was envious of people living in those jurisdictions where assisted dying is legal. He asked those who oppose assisted dying to rethink their position:

I wish they could live in my body for 24 hours and I think they would change that opinion... I'm just frustrated not to be able to have control of my own life. Not being able to make the decision for myself when enough is enough.

South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society

saves.asn.au

SAVES was established in 1983 by volunteers to campaign for a South Australian law that provides for "medically assisted" end-to-life, as a right, in appropriate circumstances, and with defined safeguards. SAVES aims to raise public debate to a point where our Members of Parliament enact a VE law which provides everyone with the choice to end prolonged and painful suffering.



Doctors for Voluntary Euthanasia Choice

drs4vechoice.org

We are a national organisation of Australian medical practitioners, both current and retired, who are committed to having a legal choice of providing information and assistance to rational adults, who, for reasons of no realistic chance of cure or relief from intolerable symptoms, would like to gently end their lives. Assistance may be by doctor provision of medication for the patient to consume, or by doctor-administration.



Christians supporting choice for Voluntary Euthanasia

christiansforve.org.au

We are Christians who believe that, as a demonstration of love and compassion, those with a terminal or hopeless illness should have the option of a pain-free, peaceful and dignified death with legal voluntary euthanasia. The overwhelming majority of Australian Christians support choice for voluntary euthanasia.



SAVE-YA Syndicated Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Youth Advocates

Facebook: Support SAVE-YA Law Reform

A national youth lobby group which aims to provide a youth voice in support of legalising voluntary euthanasia in all Australian States/Territories. Members between the ages of 18 and 35 are encouraged to join and make contact with their local MP's to inform them of their support for voluntary euthanasia law reform.



Lawyers for Death with Dignity acknowledges the need for people with profound suffering to have the legal choice for a medically assisted and dignified death. The current law says suicide is not illegal, but assisting suicide is. In many cases, those who are in terminal states have profound, unbearable suffering and are put in the undignified position of being unable to end their life without assistance. The medical profession has advanced their discipline to improve life expectancy, but appropriate changes have not been reflected in the South Australian law to deal with an often forgotten deterioration of quality of life that this may bring. saves.asn.au/lawyers



South Australian Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying

Facebook: SA Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying

We are a group of passionate nurses who believe in our patient's right to choose the end of life care that they wish, including the choice of voluntary euthanasia. Our members come from vastly different backgrounds and age groups but we all share the same goal.