

South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society Inc.

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To all Members of the South Australian Parliament

Dear Member,

For your information I write with details of a report that compares end of life decision making in 6 European countries – Sweden, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland, between June 2001 and February 2002 (June 17, 2003 <http://image.thelancet.com/extras/03art3298web.pdf>). In the latter 3 countries, assisted death at the informed request of a patient is a legal possibility.

The results show that medical end of life decisions frequently precede dying in about two-thirds of all deaths in the participating countries. Here are a few of the survey findings:

- End of life decision discussion with patients & relatives for competent patients was highest in the Netherlands
- End of life decision discussion or previously expressed wish for incompetent patients was highest in the Netherlands and Switzerland.
- End of life decision discussion or previously expressed wish for incompetent patients was discussed with relatives most frequently in the Netherlands and Belgium
- Written living wills were available for fewer than 5% of patients in all countries apart from the Netherlands, where 13% were reported
- Doctors consulted colleagues about end of life decisions for about 40% of all patients in the Netherlands, Belgium and Switzerland and for fewer than 20% in the other countries.
- Nursing staff were asked most frequently in Belgium and Switzerland

The study clearly shows more open discussion and decision making in those countries where there is legal access to assisted dying. This is of paramount importance with regard to safety. A transparent system means more honesty and accountability, guarding against a slippery slope to abuse.

The Dignity in Dying Bill, with its strict safeguards and guidelines, is urgently needed as part of a working framework for the existing practises of assisted dying. It is an irrefutable fact that these are occurring right here and now, in defiance of the law. As our lawmakers, I know you would appreciate the dangers of a law that is not working; if we don't regulate these practises there's no knowing where they could lead to.

Yours sincerely,

Frances Coombe
President