

# WRONGFUL DEATHS BY ASSISTED SUICIDE OR EUTHANASIA

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## SOCIAL CONTAGION OF SUICIDE

### Does legalising assisted suicide affect the suicide rate?

- Legalising assisted suicide for some Australians undermines the commitment to **suicide prevention for all** Australians
- Legalising assisted suicide has been shown to lead to **an increase** in the overall rate of suicides of 6.3% and of the elderly (65 years and older) by 14.5%
- This is outcome is predictable because of the well-known **Werther effect of suicide contagion whenever suicide is presented in a positive light** as a romantic or rational act
- The families of those who commit suicide under an assisted suicide law suffer high rates of posttraumatic stress disorder

### Should suicide prevention strategies include all Australians?

Proposals to legalise assisted suicide or euthanasia for a select group of people, such as the terminally ill, necessarily imply that society agrees such people may be better off dead and supports their suicide as a legitimate, rational choice to be facilitated rather than prevented.

The question arises as to how publicly and openly offering assistance to commit suicide to one group of Australians fits with the public policy goal, widely shared across the whole community, to reduce the incidence of suicide?

### Does legalising assisted suicide reduce the suicide rate as claimed?

Proponents of assisted suicide have claimed that providing the elderly, terminally ill with a legal lethal dose of drugs to facilitate assisted suicide will reduce the incidence of other forms of suicide among this group and, because, it is claimed, many of those for whom the lethal dose is prescribed may never take it, actually decrease the overall suicide rate.

This hypothesis has been subjected to careful scrutiny in [an important study](#) by David Albert Jones and David Paton comparing trends in suicide rates in those states of the United States which have legalised assisted suicide compared to those which have not.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/6df3/55333ceecc41b361da6dc996d90a17b96e9c.pdf>

The study, which controlled for various socio-economic factors, unobservable state- and year effects, and state-specific linear trends, found that legalizing assisted suicide was associated with a 6.3% increase in total suicides (i.e. including assisted suicides).

This effect was significantly larger in the over 65 year old age group with a massive 14.5% increase in total suicides.

The introduction of legalised assisted suicide was not associated with a reduction in non-assisted suicide rates, nor with an increase in the mean age of non-assisted suicide.

The conclusion is that assisted suicide either does not inhibit (nor acts as an alternative to) non-assisted suicide, or that it acts in this way in some individuals but is associated with an increased inclination to suicide in other individuals.

The latter suggestion would be consistent with the [well known Werther effect of suicide contagion](#).<sup>2</sup>

## Effect on families

Suicide is a distressing event that disrupts the lives of families, friends and communities who are bereaved.

Like any other suicide, assisted suicide can profoundly affect surviving family members and friends.

A [recent study](#) found that about 20% of family members or friends who witnessed an assisted suicide in Switzerland, where assisted suicide is legal, subsequently suffered from full (13%) post-traumatic stress disorder or subthreshold (6.5%) post-traumatic stress disorder.<sup>3</sup>

## Conclusion

Proposals to promote assisted suicide for some people runs an unacceptable risk of undermining efforts to prevent suicide for all other members of the community and of increasing the trauma suffered by families, friends and communities due to the suicide of loved ones.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00048670701266680>

<sup>3</sup> <https://linkinghub.elsevier.com/retrieve/pii/S0924933810002683>