

MY LIFE MY CHOICE

A newsletter produced for the purpose of educating and raising awareness of the need for voluntary assisted dying law reform in Queensland — No.27 August 2021

Doctors do support VAD Backing for Bill based on evidence

As advocates of voluntary assisted dying know only too well, opponents of the VAD Bill soon to be debated by the Queensland Parliament will say and do anything to torpedo a sensible law giving a compassionate choice to those experiencing intolerable suffering at the end of their life.

Our opponents often try to pass off as fact distorted, heavily manipulated, or just plain wrong information in a bid to cover the fact they have few if any legitimate arguments against VAD laws. (See page 2)

One of the furbies regularly trotted out by VAD opponents is the claim that doctors do not support voluntary assisted dying. The mere existence of the group for which I speak, [Doctors for Assisted Dying Choice](#), shows the claims by VAD opponents are just not true.

The fact is that among medical professionals there are different views on VAD and the official position of any individual or organisation cannot and should not be taken as expressing the views of all doctors.

For example, the official position of the Australian Medical Association (AMA) is against VAD.

Some opponents of voluntary assisted dying cite the national AMA's 2016 member survey to claim that the majority of doctors oppose VAD. But they deliberately omit the fact that the survey's summary statement acknowledged that "more than half of respondents (52%) believe [VAD] can form a legitimate part of medical care".

Also, with fewer than one in three doctors being AMA members, polling of a wider group that same year by leading medical publication *Australian Doctor* showed 65% support for "legal reforms to allow patients to end their own lives" based on "requests for assisted dying restricted to terminally ill patients with enduring unbearable pain and suffering".



Members of Doctors for Assisted Dying Choice, Dr Sid Finnigan, Dr Malcolm Parker, and Dr Jenny Browne, give evidence to the Queensland Parliamentary Health Committee hearing

Majority support for VAD currently amongst doctors in Queensland was highlighted by the state branch of the AMA's recent evidence to the Parliamentary Health Committee that, even with the contentious issue of dementia, October 2020 polling of its members showed 77% support for the idea of patients being eligible to seek access to VAD if they specified their wish in their advance health directive with instructions on when they may lose mental capacity.

While dementia patients will not be covered by the proposed VAD Bill, the AMA survey indicates that its "official" position against VAD does not have majority support of its members. It is a pity, and a mystery, why the state AMA did not use its October 2020 survey to directly ask members if they backed the VAD Bill.

Sensibly, in other states where VAD laws have been passed, the AMA works with health authorities to implement it.

We would naturally expect the same to happen here if our own VAD Bill is successful.



Dr Sid Finnigan MBBS, FRANZCO
Queensland Convenor
[Doctors For Assisted Dying Choice](#)

The facts from end-of-life professionals

VAD opponents often peddle the myth that palliative care addresses all end-of-life suffering so voluntary assisted dying laws are not needed.

This claim has been proved wrong by parliamentary inquiries here and interstate based on evidence from those in the palliative care sector.

Most recently MPs on the Health Committee which is examining the VAD Bill heard from Dr Will Cairns who has held leadership roles in various palliative care organisations at state and national levels and was director of palliative care in Townsville from 1992 to 2016.

He [told the Committee's hearing on 12 July](#): "I think there are very few palliative care professionals who believe we can resolve all of the issues from which people are suffering from at the end of their life. We are pretty good at controlling pain. But certainly not to 100%."

On the anti-VAD argument that says palliative care should be improved, especially in regional areas, before VAD laws were considered, Dr Cairns said: "I am not sure those who opposed voluntary assisted dying would accept voluntary assisted dying even if palliative care was available everywhere."

His view echoes that of Dr Edward Mantle, palliative care specialist with the Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service.

Dr Mantle, who said he was not a VAD supporter but respected a person's right to choose it, gave evidence to the former [evidence to the former Health Committee](#).

He said: "I think it is disingenuous, and it is probably closer to a bald-faced lie, when palliative physicians say that they can relieve all suffering for all patients. It is simply not true."

JOIN OUR VIGIL FOR VAD



SPEAKER'S CORNER
IN FRONT OF PARLIAMENT HOUSE,
GEORGE STREET BRISBANE

MONDAY 13 SEPTEMBER
ASSEMBLE FROM 5PM FOR 5.30PM
START

SEE PAGE 3

SID FINNIGAN

Scare tactics replace statistics

Shameless manipulation of data by VAD opponents

A recent hearing by the cross-party Health Committee of the Queensland Parliament on the state's proposed VAD Bill showcased the deceptive tactics employed by some of those who are fighting a sensible, compassionate, and overdue law reform.

Once again the anti-VAD group Cherish Life claimed that "suicide rates go up when we introduce VAD". They alleged that "since VAD was introduced in Victoria the suicide rate has gone up over 20%".

The claim is wrong. It has been shown to be wrong, yet opponents still try to use the false and misleading assertion which has no basis in fact.

The reputable online website [Dying for Choice](#) operated by VAD proponent Neal Francis has previously discredited and debunked the claim.

The website shows that to achieve the 20%-plus figure Cherish Life cherry picks 2017 coronial statistics from Victoria, supposedly as the last full year before the state's VAD law took effect in June 2019.

It then takes figures for 2020 as the first full year under the VAD law to show a rise in suicide numbers from 694 to 698.

But that is not enough to achieve a 20% rise.

So they dishonestly add in 144 deaths in 2020 under the Victorian VAD Act and treat them as suicides to deliver their fake figure of 842 suicides in 2020 and their dishonest 20%-plus rise.

As the Dying for Choice website points out, the only way the 20%-plus figure can be achieved is to "shamefully and humiliatingly disrespect Victoria's terminally ill who died peacefully under its VAD law in 2020".

But the website points out more dishonesty in other steps along the way.

For example, Cherish Life uses 2017 as the last full year without VAD in Victoria, although 2018 was actually the year they should have chosen since the VAD Act did not take effect until mid-2019.

But if they had chosen the correct year of 2018 it would have showed a drop in suicide numbers which clearly didn't suit their cause.

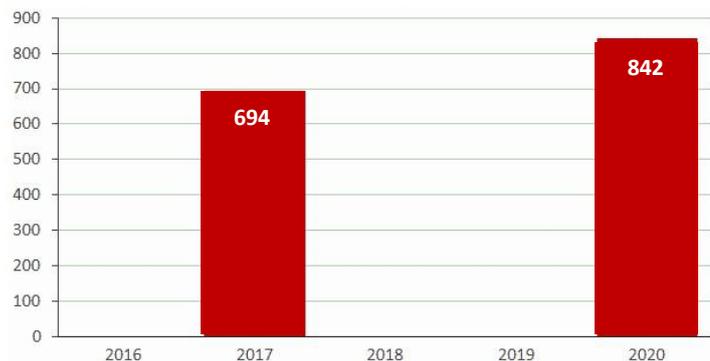
At the [14 July Health Committee](#) hearing Cherish Life cited other Victorian coronial figures in an attempt to muddy the waters, but these were only part-year figures.

Unfortunately, VAD opponents wilfully employ dishonest tactics, cherry-picked statistics, and shonky calculations in their efforts to deny a better choice at the end of life to people in intolerable suffering.

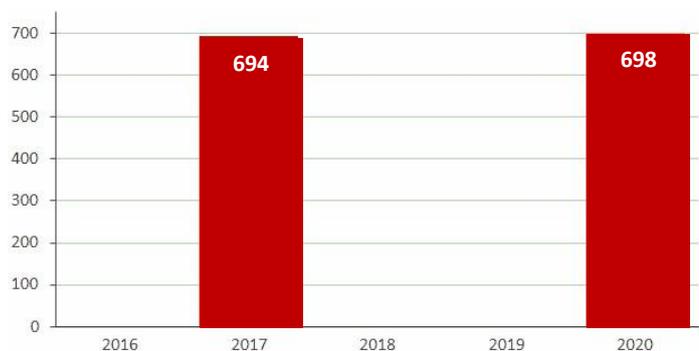
Sadly they often do that by conflating VAD with suicide and trying to make all sorts of misleading and blatantly wrong claims using official suicide data.

This newsletter has previously mentioned claims by opponents that after VAD laws were introduced in Oregon in the USA in 1997, the state's suicide rate "leapt" to be 42% higher than the US average in some subsequent years.

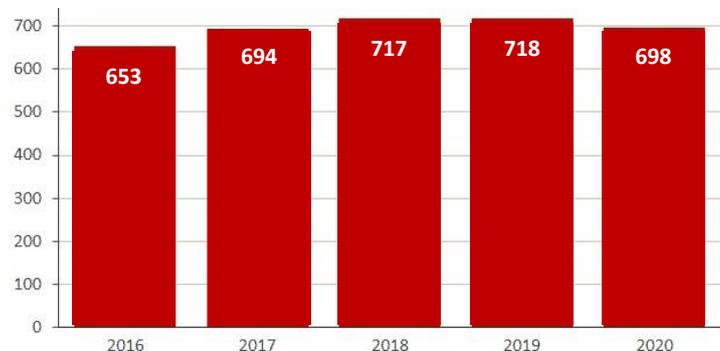
Neil Francis has [also exposed in detail this false claim](#) on his Dying for Choice website. He found that Oregon's suicide rate was indeed 41%



The faked figure for 2020 including 144 VAD cases



The figures for 2017 (not the last year without VAD) and 2020



The figures since 2016 showing a drop from 2018 to 2020

higher than the US average in 2010 and 2012, he also pointed out: "To have meaning, the [Oregon] rates and trends must at least be compared with (a) other state rates in the same time period, and (b) with Oregon rates prior to the Act."

He noted that official US data sources had reported a general rise in the suicide rate since 2000, but attributed to factors such as personal financial stress from job losses and a general US economic downturn. VAD laws were not a factor.

Francis looked at data from other states such as Vermont which, for the period around 2010 had a suicide rate 44% higher than the US average. But there is problem for those trying to claim a "suicide contagion" in the wake of the implementation of VAD laws because Vermont's VAD law took effect in 2013.

It did not have VAD laws when Oregon's suicide rate was 41% above the national average.

How could VAD be linked to an above-average suicide rate in Oregon while an even higher comparative rate was shown in a state without VAD? The evidence-based answer is it can't.

Join us at our September 13 vigil

Show our 93 state MPs they must vote for VAD

There is no doubting the vast support right across the Queensland community for voluntary assisted dying laws.

For years now reputable market research organisations have measured the level of community support at 70% to 80%.

There is strong support for VAD from Queenslanders of all political persuasions, proving the correctness and value of a true conscience vote on the VAD Bill when it reaches Parliament in September.

There is strong support across our state, in both the south-east corner and in regional Queensland which makes it hard to understand why a handful of our 93 state MPs have already declared themselves opposed to the VAD Bill drafted by the independent and expert Queensland Law reform Commission.

DWDQ and other groups advocating for voluntary assisted dying law reform will hold a Vigil for VAD on the eve of the start of parliamentary debate on the VAD Bill.

The 13 September event is a chance for you to join us to take our demands for VAD laws right to the doorstep of our



Queensland Parliament so that MPs are given the clear message that we want them to support the VAD Bill.

This is just part of the efforts being made by DWDQ and its members and supporters to let MPs know how we feel.

Many people have worked for many decades to get us to where we are now. We are on the cusp of seeing VAD laws enacted in our state. But we must not slacken our efforts.

A strong showing at our vigil will help deliver an important message to the 93 MPs who

will decide the VAD Bill's fate.

Visit our website at www.dwdq.org.au for details or check [our Facebook page](#) and let us know you'll be there to help us have the VAD Bill passed.

I look forward to seeing you there.



Jos Hall
President
Dying With Dignity
Queensland

DIARY NOTE:

Come along to the Vigil for VAD and let our state MPs know you want them to vote for the VAD Bill.

- **DATE:** Monday 13 September 2021
- **TIME:** Assemble from 5pm for 5.30pm start
- **PLACE:** Speaker's Corner, outside State Parliament George Street

Forums with MPs

Jeanette Wiley flew the DWDQ flag at several public forums organised by state MPs to inform constituents about the VAD Bill.

The Member for Caloundra, Jason Hunt, and the Member for Springwood, Mick de Brenni, are just two MPs who invited My Life My Choice representatives such as David Muir of the Clem Jones Group, Dr Sid Finnigan of Doctors for Assisted Dying Choice, and Everald Compton from Christians for Voluntary Assisted Dying Queensland to address the well-attended forums.

Chair of the Health Committee, Aaron Harper MP, also attended the Springwood event.

Although COVID-19 lockdowns pose a challenge to future forums, it is hoped more of the already scheduled events can be held in coming months so that more Queenslanders can have their questions about VAD and the VAD Bill answered.



Clockwise from top left: Everald Compton, David Muir, Jason Hunt MP, Jeanette Wiley, and Dr Sid Finnigan at the Caloundra forum; a big COVID-safe audience at Caloundra Power Boat Club; Mick de Brenni MP, Aaron Harper MP, Jeanette Wiley, Dr Sid Finnigan, and David Muir at the Springwood forum; Jeanette Wiley speaks at Springwood



VAD law deserves support

MPs urged to pass Bill as it stands

OTHER KEY POINTS MADE
TO THE HEALTH
COMMITTEE MPs:

Recently, as part of the My Life My Choice coalition, I appeared before the Health Committee of our State Parliament to support the Bill [it is examining](#) aimed at delivering a system of voluntary assisted dying in Queensland.

Like other groups in our coalition I made it clear to the six MPs on the Committee that their report should recommend that the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021* should be passed in its current form without any amendments.

We believe that the Bill as drafted by the independent Queensland Law Reform Commission is the best VAD law presented so far in any jurisdiction in Australia.

The Bill delivers equity of access for people seeking access to voluntary assisted dying while also containing sufficient safeguards.

Safeguards are essential in any VAD law. But I urged the Committee to reject the arguments put forward by opponents for more “safeguards”.

The aim of VAD opponents is to complicate the Bill to the point it becomes unworkable. As I told the Committee, opponents of the Bill would be happy with only one safeguard – no VAD law – which in fact is no safeguard at all when it comes to the unregulated current practices surrounding terminal sedation.

I urged the Committee to reject scare tactics and misinformation about VAD, especially claims by opponents who still try to conflate VAD with suicide.

Voluntary assisted dying is not suicide. Not only do VAD advocates make that point, but so too do people like former Liberal Party Premier of Victoria, [Jeff Kennett](#), who is also a former chair of Beyond Blue. So too does the US research and advocacy group, the [American Association of Suicidology](#).

So too does the *VAD Bill 2021* which will be debated in the Queensland Parliament in September.

Suicide is a choice between life and death usually by a person in an irrational state of mind despite having reasons to live.

Voluntary assisted dying is a choice between two deaths – a good and a bad death – by a competent person whose life is already drawing to a close.

VAD opponents appearing before the Health Committee persisted in suggesting that we don't need a VAD Bill if only palliative care was boosted.

But advocacy of VAD has never meant sidelining



You can watch the Health Committee hearings, including the appearance by David Muir on Friday 16 July (above), by visiting the [Parliament.TV](#) site on the Queensland Parliament's website.

or neglecting palliative care. VAD advocates want to see better resourcing and wider availability of palliative care, especially in regional Queensland, and already extra funds have been earmarked by the state government.

The evidence shows that both VAD and palliative care are needed because palliative care can help most, but not all, people.

This fact was put to the previous Committee's inquiry into VAD in evidence by several authorities, one of whom was Dr Edward Mantle, palliative care specialist with the Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service.

Dr Mantle declared himself to be a VAD opponent, but respected an individual's right to choose it if they wished. But he also told [the previous Committee's inquiry](#): “I think it is disingenuous, and it is probably closer to a bald-faced lie, when palliative physicians say that they can relieve all suffering for all patients. It is simply not true.”

The VAD Bill now being considered by the Health Committee is the product of solid evidence gathered by the previous Committee's extensive public inquiry.

The Bill, like other VAD laws, does not offer automatic access to voluntary assisted dying, but allows people to seek access in line with legislated criteria and safeguards.

Above all, let us all remember one very simple fact: Under any VAD law there will not be a single extra death, but there will be a lot less suffering.

That's why we urge the Committee to recommend the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021* to the Queensland Parliament unchanged.



David Muir AM
Chair
The Clem Jones Trust

The Bill draws on and improves existing laws and the model Bill by end-of-life law experts professors [Lindy Willmott](#) and [Ben White](#) recommended by the former Committee as a starting point for the QLRC. VAD law pioneer, former Northern Territory chief minister Marshall Perron, described the White/Willmott model as the best he'd seen. It says a lot that the QLRC has improved on that.

Evidence shows that the Bill's safeguards will work. Betty King, the former Supreme Court judge who chairs Victoria's VAD Review Board which examines every single VAD case since the law took effect in June 2019, [told the ABC in April](#): “I have not seen one example so far of anyone who has been pushed, coerced, or inveigled in any way into taking the assisted dying medication.”

Advocacy group Compassion and Choices has looked at data from American states with VAD laws – what they call “medical aid in dying”. [It says](#): “In more than 20 years of experience since the first law was enacted in Oregon, and an additional 40-plus years of combined evidence and cumulative data from the laws passed in other jurisdictions there is not a single substantiated case of abuse or coercion nor any civil or criminal charges filed related to the practice. Not one.”

The Bill accommodates the position of opponents 100% – with the single word “voluntary”. A VAD law will never impact someone who doesn't want to choose VAD, but nobody should deny others that choice.

NSW MP unveils VAD Bill

Initiative has multi-party support

NSW independent MP Alex Greenwich as released for public comment his voluntary assisted dying Bill.

A copy of Mr Greenwich's draft Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021 is [available on the Dying With Dignity NSW website.](#)

Earlier this year the Member for Sydney announced his plans to pursue the passage of a VAD law through the NSW Parliament.

After releasing the draft Bill, Mr Greenwich said he was heartened by the "overwhelming support" for his initiative.

He said all NSW state MPs now had



Alex Greenwich

a copy of the Bill as part of his consultation process plus details about how the law would work and the protections built into the proposed system.

"The urgency of this reform to communities across NSW is represented by the growing multi-partisan coalition backing this conservative and compassionate legislation," he said.

"I look forward to welcoming as many members as possible to co-sponsor the Bill."

Mr Greenwich said after the consultation period with fellow MPs and key stakeholders he hoped to introduce the Bill into the NSW Parliament in August with debate in September.

The Greenwich VAD Bill has received strong cross-party in-principle support as well as support for a conscience vote when it is debated in the NSW Parliament.



Premier notes 'historic moment'

Western Australia has recorded the first death under its Voluntary Assisted Dying Act passed by the WA Parliament in 2019 and effective from 1 July.

WA Premier Mark McGowan said the passing of the unidentified terminally ill person was "a historic moment" for the state.

"We passed these laws so terminally ill Western Australians, who are suffering, could have the compassionate choice to end their lives with dignity," the Premier said.



Mark McGowan

"Understandably, this person and their family have chosen to do this privately.

"We must all respect that choice, just as we respect the individual's choice to use these laws to end their suffering.

"Death is a difficult issue, and we don't like thinking about what the end of our lives may look like.

"I am sure many will find comfort in the fact these laws mean neither they nor their loved ones will be forced to suffer needlessly at the end of their lives," Mr McGowan said.

Indigenous woman chooses VAD



Mary-Ellen Passmore with family members at peace with VAD decision

Source: Aaron Fernandes/SBS News/NITV

A 63-year-old grandmother and Wongatha-Yamatji woman, Mary-Ellen Passmore, was reportedly one of the first VAD cases in Western Australia.

[News reports of her death](#) said Ms Passmore who had lived with motor neurone disease for more than six years had declared she was "at peace" the day before ending her life under WA's voluntary assisted dying laws.

At the time of her death she was totally bedridden, had difficulty speaking and swallowing, and was fed through a tube.

"I feel at peace within myself. I have the love of my children, and they are saying, 'yes mum, you've had enough,'" Ms Passmore said.

"And I love my children for allowing me to do this."

Ms Passmore reportedly died surrounded by her family and medical staff at a Perth hospital singing *Hallelujah*.

In a statement her family said: "The doctors made sure right until the end, that this is what she wanted.

"The care and compassion provided by the doctors made a big difference."

One of her three children and eldest son Challan Edwards said: "Seeing her cry in pain, (that's) not my mum.

"She's a strong Black woman. We've got a huge family and she was the leader, she was a really strong woman."

VAD rights should be protected

Church leaders don't reflect their congregations

A number of church figures and faith-based health care organisations have expressed their opposition to some key parts of the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021* due to be debated by Queensland's 93 state MPs in September.



Everal Compton AO
Christians for Voluntary Assisted Dying Queensland

I am particularly concerned that some churches have said that if the VAD Bill is passed in its current form, then residents in their residential facilities living in homes or units or rooms, will not be allowed to end their lives there through VAD.

In my [submission](#) to the Health Committee which is examining the VAD Bill before it is debated in the Queensland Parliament, I made it plain that as a Christian I find this attitude arrogant and that I firmly believe it should be illegal and the subject of heavy penalties if churches end up eroding or denying the basic rights of those in their care.

It is yet another example evident in the VAD

'I totally oppose the stand taken by all churches against voluntary assisted dying'

debate of church hierarchy being out of touch with the attitudes and expectations of their congregations.

I believe that wherever a person lives, it is their home, and they alone should decide what happens in their own home. No church

is entitled to dictate what they will do.

What some churches is suggesting is arrogant oppression.

In my submission I strongly recommend that a clause be added to the VAD legislation to have heavy financial fines payable by churches and their office bearers when they infringe the rights of their residents in this way.

I am almost 90 and have served as an Elder of the Uniting Church for 62 years. In fact I am an Elder for Life of the church.

As such I am very frank in my views on VAD. I support a person's right to seek access to VAD if that is what they want and if they meet the Bill's proposed legal criteria at the end of their life.

My position means I totally oppose the stand taken by all churches against voluntary assisted dying.

Research reveals strong backing

With community support for VAD consistently running at around 80% it's clear that many church leaders are out of step with the attitudes of their congregations.

Polling conducted for the Clem Jones Group in February 2020 which asked people of faith their views on VAD show that even those who actively practise their faith – not just proclaim it – support VAD including 60% of Catholics. (at right)

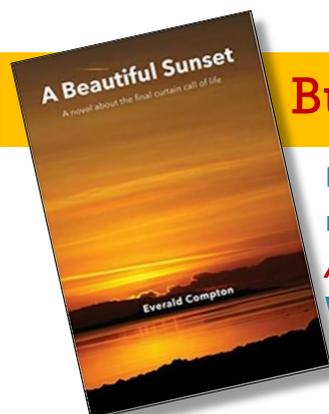
Voluntary assisted dying is just that – voluntary. If VAD is made available in Queensland, anyone who does not support it can choose not to access it.

But they should not use their personal beliefs to prevent others from making their own choice.

RELIGION	SUPPORT VAD	OPPOSE VAD	DON'T KNOW
No religion	85	5	10
Catholic	68	16	16
Anglican	79	11	11
Uniting Church /Presbyterian	83	6	11
Other Christian	57	31	13
Other religion	72	7	21

PRACTISING OR NON-PRACTISING	SUPPORT VAD	OPPOSE VAD	DON'T KNOW
Practising Catholic	60	24	16
Non-practising Catholic	73	11	16
Practising non-Catholic Christian	54	33	13
Non-practising non-Catholic Christian	83	6	11

Polling of 1,020 Queenslanders for the Clem Jones Group by YouGov from 31 January to 5 February 2020. Some figures rounded.



Buy the book and back VAD

Every purchase of Everal Compton's novel about voluntary assisted dying, *A Beautiful Sunset*, helps Dying With Dignity Queensland.

PLACE YOUR ORDER NOW!



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@ChristiansforVAD

MY LIFE

MY CHOICE

The *My Life My Choice* monthly newsletter is produced by the Clem Jones Group, Dying With Dignity Queensland, Doctors for Assisted Dying Choice (Qld), and Christians for Voluntary Assisted Dying (Qld) for the dominant purpose of educating and raising awareness of voluntary assisted dying law reform in Queensland and other states and territories.



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