

Dear Members of the Western Australian Parliament,

As a doctor, I write to ask you to support Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation in Western Australia.

This will allow doctors to respond with compassion when our terminally ill patients turn to us for help of last resort, the help to speed up their dying process. We know that this request is not uncommon.

We believe that terminally ill patients who are enduring irremediable suffering should have the right to choose a gentle release at the end of life. We support clear eligibility criteria and a rigorous process to ensure patients are not subject to coercion or undue influence. We support the right of our colleagues to conscientiously decline to participate in voluntary assisted dying. We believe that this combination of accessibility, safeguards and respect for the choices of others is present in the *Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill* introduced into the State Parliament on 6 August 2019.

Many of our patients fear prolonged suffering during the dying process far more than they fear death itself. As a legislator, you can alleviate this fear.

For most people who are dying, palliative care is sufficient to meet their needs for relief of suffering. We support sufficient funding to meet these needs, especially in rural and regional WA. Recent funding increases are an important step in the right direction.

We know, however, that for a significant proportion of terminally ill people, palliative care is not enough. Recent evidence from WA shows that at least 5% of dying patients report unrelieved suffering despite receiving expert palliative care. You have the power to ensure that these people can also have a good death, on their own terms and with their loved ones around them, if that is their choice.

A voluntary assisted dying law will enable terminally ill patients to have more open conversations with their doctors about all the end of life choices available to them. The comfort of having control in this way is itself a great relief. We know from overseas experience that about one third of those who are prescribed lethal medication are so comforted by the sense of control it gives them, that they never actually take it.

Such a law will also enable doctors to avoid the legal uncertainty and stress in trying to respond to the pleas of their patients for a quicker death, in part by drastically reducing the need for the problematic practice of terminal sedation. This is a medical intervention provided for patients with severe refractory suffering, with the aim of rendering the person comatose until they die. These patients typically die over days to weeks, often from dehydration.

There is evidence in Western Australia that terminal sedation is neither regulated nor documented. There are no safeguards or consent protocols in place, and since the treatment is not universally offered, patients are often unaware that it is available.

There is also evidence that concern about possible prosecution for hastening death causes some doctors to provide less than optimal pain relief and sedation in the terminal phase of illness. This can result in prolonged, needless suffering.

Without a voluntary assisted dying law, too many terminally ill people will continue to take matters into their own hands. Coronial statistics show that over 10% of suicides in Western Australia are terminally ill people who take their own lives because they see no other way out. They do this often by violent means, and alone, so as not to implicate others. The effect on all concerned is invariably traumatic.

As a society, we can do better than this. The reality of current terminal care is, without a doubt, more problematic and open to abuse than a well-monitored, thoroughly safeguarded voluntary assisted dying law.

We ask you to vote for a safe, humane and compassionate law that will also fulfil the wishes of the overwhelming majority of your constituents.

Signed:

Name (printed):

Qualifications:

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