

# Talking About Assisted Dying



## Conversation Toolkit

**Victoria, WA, Tasmania and SA already have compassionate voluntary assisted dying laws. Now it's Queensland's turn.**

In a matter of weeks, a Voluntary Assisted Dying bill (VAD) will be debated by Queensland's Parliament for the first time. A majority of MPs must vote in favour of the bill for VAD to become law.

In this debate, each MP gets a conscience vote. This means they are free to make up their own minds on the issue, rather than 'towing the party line'.

80% of Queenslanders support VAD laws. But it's not enough to support VAD ourselves. We have to make sure our MPs do the same on our behalf.

**That's why the single most important thing you can do to make VAD legal in Queensland is to contact your local MP.**

Right now, VAD supporters like you, from Cairns to Coolangatta, are contacting their MPs. They're also encouraging their friends and family to do the same; in workplaces, community events, down at the sports club and at church.

Your local MP *wants* to hear from you. As your representative, your opinions matter to them.

A cynic might say this is because you decide if they

are re-elected. But our experience tells us otherwise; most MPs are genuine, diligent and take their electoral responsibilities seriously.

For many MPs, this is the most profound issue they will consider in their political careers – and they do not take this responsibility lightly. They want to get it right.

Our research shows the best way to win the hearts and minds of MPs is by talking with them about VAD and sharing our personal experiences. It can get emotional, but that's nothing to be afraid of.

Just like us, MPs have strong views on this topic and many will have their own personal connections to the issue. As always, approach conversations with sensitivity, care and respect.

This guide will prepare you for having conversations about VAD that are persuasive, effective and meaningful. This is how we will change the law in Queensland.

For more information, including Andrew Denton's webinar on how to engage your MP, visit:

[www.gogentleaustralia.org.au/qld](http://www.gogentleaustralia.org.au/qld)



Voluntary Assisted Dying

**Queensland, it's time.**

**#qld4vad  
qld4vad.org.au**

# How to contact your MP about VAD

## A step by step guide



### Making first contact

Find out who your local MP is. You can do this by using Go Gentle's MP Look-up Tool at [gogentleaustralia.org.au/qlld](http://gogentleaustralia.org.au/qlld) Simply enter your postcode, or contact us if you're not sure.

You can get in touch with your local MP's office by letter, email or phone. If you'd like to speak to your MP in person, it's best to make an appointment rather than just turn up; MPs are often out of town.

In most instances, a staff member will reply to you. Don't worry – your message will still reach your MP. Staff are skilled, organised and control your MP's diary, so they are

the best ones to help you organise a meeting. Be friendly and remember their name.

Don't feel disappointed if you don't hear back straight away. MPs are very busy and hear from hundreds of constituents every day. If you don't receive a response within ten days, it's worth calling the MP's office and politely asking if they have looked at your email or letter.

Always make clear that you are a constituent and share your address and full contact details – including a phone number – so your MP can easily respond to you.

### What to say

The most powerful thing you can do is share your personal experience and reasons for supporting VAD. You can also ask your MP about their views on VAD.

Be concise and to the point. Your MP will meet dozens of people and receive hundreds of emails every day. In your first sentence, explain you're getting in touch to express your support for the Voluntary Assisted Dying bill.

Be polite and respectful. An exchange where both parties listen, share ideas and find common ground is much more effective than an angry debate.

Don't be afraid to show emotion. VAD is an emotive topic and many MPs will also have their own personal stories. Your honesty and authenticity will be appreciated by your MP.

And relax! You don't need to be a political expert or know the ins and outs of the bill – that's your MP's job. All you need to do is explain why you support the VAD bill.

### Keep in mind

While it's easy to click a survey or petition online, MPs tell us that receiving a letter or email that someone has taken the time and effort to write means much more than a 'form letter'.

Even if your MP is staunchly opposed to VAD, it is still important to contact them. If they receive many letters on the topic, they will know they are out of step with their electorate and your story may temper the strength of their opposition in the Parliamentary debates.

Sometimes it can feel difficult to meet with your MP,

particularly if you're sharing a very personal experience. MPs tell us it's fine to bring someone for support, or visit in a group.

If you've contacted your MP in writing, we'd suggest following up to ask for a meeting. You can also follow that up with another short letter or card. MPs are happy to build relationships with constituents and you can be in touch more than once. But don't overdo it – and avoid an email war at all costs!

**Finally, a simple thank you goes a long way.**

# How to contact your MP about VAD



## Talking about Voluntary Assisted Dying

**The best way to connect with your MP is to share your personal experience. Your real, first-hand stories have power. If you want to go further, consider the following:**

- This law is about choice, compassion and autonomy. It's about giving Queenslanders with a terminal illness who are already dying a say over how that happens.
- No more people will die through VAD, but fewer will suffer.
- Victoria, WA, Tasmania and SA already have laws. NSW is preparing to debate a bill. We can't be left behind. 80% of Queenslanders support VAD. We cannot miss this opportunity to get VAD laws over the line.
- Palliative care in Australia is excellent but it cannot relieve all suffering. This law is for the 4-10% of people whose suffering Palliative Care Australia acknowledges it cannot adequately relieve, even with the best care.
- Palliative care and VAD work together. It's not an either/or. In Victoria, 9 out of 10 people who receive a VAD permit are also receiving excellent palliative care. Both choices should be available to a person dying of terminal disease.

**The Australian model of VAD is one of the most conservative in the world and has rigorous safeguards, including:**

- It is limited to people with terminal illness, such as cancer or MND, in the final 12 months of their lives
- The terminally ill person must also have decision-making capacity
- Two doctors have to carry out thorough checks regarding the person's eligibility, and it all gets re-checked by an independent review board
- Mental illness, disability and advanced age on their own do not make a person eligible.

**The law has been working safely and effectively in Victoria for more than two years. The Victorian experience shows:**

- Opponents' scaremongering scenarios have not turned out to be true
- In fact, these humane laws help people have better deaths – which makes a big difference to the person, their loved ones and carers
- The words most often used to describe VAD deaths are 'beautiful' and 'peaceful'
- VAD has a palliative effect – the reassurance of knowing the option is there allows people to live longer and better lives.
- People can change their minds at any time and, in Victoria and elsewhere, about one third of those who receive the medication never end up taking it. But just having the option gives great comfort.

# Talking About Assisted Dying



Ask someone else to contact their MP

## The right time

**“Do you have a few minutes?”**

Use your common sense to check if now is a good time to talk.



## Introduce the issue

**“I’d like to talk to you about Voluntary Assisted Dying and the bill that’s before parliament.”**

Remember, this might be the first time that they have really thought about the issue, so give them time and space to work it through for themselves before you start digging deeper into the discussion.

## If they support it

**“Me too! Why do you support it?”**

This gives them a chance to really think about why this issue is important to them – which means that they are more likely to be clear about why they support this – and for you to share why this issue matters to you too.

## If they’re unsure

**“It sounds like you are not 100% on this. What part of you is leaning towards supporting end of life choice? For me, it means that...”**

You can help by moving this from being an ‘issue’ to being about a person they care about. So listen, but also share why this matters to you.

## If they’re opposed

**“It sounds like we might just have to agree to disagree.”**

If they have lots of reasons why they don’t support VAD, they have probably already made up their mind. Try not to take this personally.

It can be hard when people you know don’t see things in the same way or share your values. But all it means is that they are someone who cannot take that last step with you on this issue.

Remember, the **overwhelming majority** of Queenslanders support VAD for people with terminal illness. So right now it’s better for you to focus on finding those people who are mostly supportive but have questions – than trying to convince or change someone’s mind.

## Ask them if they will contact their MP

**“Can I count on you to contact your MP to make sure they vote for this law?”**

No matter how strongly someone seems to support the issue, it’s always worth asking if they will take the next step to action. Complacency is the biggest danger to this law passing.



## If they say they will contact their MP

**“That’s great! There are Queenslanders with terminal illness out there who desperately need this choice. I can walk you through how to contact your MP now.”**

## Say thank you

**“Thanks for talking to me about this today.”**

Always end the conversation well. Our campaign is about compassion, after all.

# Talking About Assisted Dying

## Addressing concerns



### “What about coercion/elder abuse?”

VAD laws are safer for everyone, doctors and patients alike. A law brings regulation and shines a light on any abuse or coercion that may have been happening behind closed doors.

Plus, the bill has very strict safeguards and eligibility criteria.

Remember, advanced age, disability or mental illness do not make a person eligible. The person must be terminally ill as well.

In Victoria, where a law has been in place for almost two years, there is no evidence of abuse.

### “Don’t people often outlive their prognosis?”

Research shows doctors more often overestimate than underestimate the time people have left. Sometimes people defy the odds, which is fantastic. But in reality, people who have 12 months or less left to live are very unwell.

Remember, people don’t want to die. They can change their minds or delay taking the drug at any time. However, people who choose VAD are dying, and it is inevitable - they want to control how that happens.

### “The doctor can just give you morphine if you’re in pain and suffering, can’t they?”

This is about more than physical pain - this is about suffering. The best pain medication in the world cannot relieve all suffering, such as the sensations of drowning in your own fluids, experiencing severe breathlessness or uncontrollable seizures. It also can’t deal with the psychological suffering of feeling helpless and of having lost control of your own body and your future.

Ask them: *Have you ever thought about your own death? How would you want it to be? If there was the option to plan it, have music playing, your loved ones around you and a chance to say goodbye - would you prefer that?*

### “Isn’t there a risk the law will get wider over time?”

There’s no evidence of this. In Oregon, the law has been essentially the same since it was passed more than 20 years ago!

The countries that have wider laws have had wider laws from day one.

### “Surely we just need better hospice and palliative care?”

It’s not an either/or. We want more funding for palliative care, as well as voluntary assisted dying as an option for the small number of people who need it – the 4% whose suffering Palliative Care Australia acknowledges even the best care cannot relieve.

Ask them: *Have you experienced a death close to you? What was it like? What made it good/difficult?*

### “Will this encourage suicide?”

Assisted dying is not suicide. People who seek VAD are terminally ill and at the very end of their lives. They do not want to die and have pursued all the treatments they can. However, they are dying and they want to control how that happens. VAD is not a choice between life and death but **a choice between two deaths**. People want autonomy and the ability to avoid unnecessary suffering at the end.

Sadly, the current legal situation means some terminally ill people feel they have no other option but to take their own lives, often in lonely and violent ways, to escape their suffering. In these cases, a VAD law may actually reduce suicides.

According to the Coroner, each month in Queensland around seven people with terminal or chronic, debilitating illness take their own lives.