

End of Life Choice



Newsletter on current debates

'Tis an end devoutly to be wished

*Ian Wood provides a Christian perspective on assisted dying.**

The majority of Australians who designate themselves as Christian support assisted dying choice. A 2012 Newspann found nearly 9 out of 10 Anglicans, and over 3 out of 4 Catholics, support assisted dying reform. Indeed, this is the reason *Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Euthanasia*, was cofounded by Rev Trevor Bensch (from South Australia) and myself in 2009. Our aim is to counter the "religious interference", that is, the opposition to assisted dying choice from the conservative or fundamentalist Christians and a vocal church hierarchy.

The 2016 Australian Election Studies (a collaborative project between universities, based at the ANU) survey showed that support for assisted dying amongst Anglicans was 79% and amongst Catholics, 74%, and amongst people with any religious affiliation at all, was 71%. (See *ELC Newsletter* 46)



Why do our Christian Group members support assisted dying? None of us wish to die in horrific ways such as uncontrollable vomiting of blood and faecal material due to an inoperable blocked bowel, fungating tumours where the body is rotting from the inside, or drowning in your own saliva from MND, to list just three examples.

Ian Wood was a community pharmacist in Port Pirie, South Australia, before retiring in 2000.

Former Archbishop Desmond Tutu, one of the most respected religious leaders in the world, speaking in support of the Falconer Bill in UK, said: "I have been fortunate to spend my life working for dignity for the living. Now I wish to apply my mind to the issue of dignity for the dying. I revere the sanctity of life - but not at any cost."

All members of my group would agree that the terminally ill need to be treated with compassion and care, supported by family, friends and the community, and treated as precious members of the human family. We



also believe that palliative care (PC) provides an essential service for the dying. However, we know that even the best PC does not provide adequate relief to between 5 and 10% of those dying.

Palliative Care Outcomes Collaboration's own analysis of approximately 90 PC facilities shows that one in six patients report moderate to severe distress from pain during the terminal phase of their terminal illness.

The last resort in palliative care, when all else fails, is to place the person in a medically induced coma, known as terminal sedation, where they gradually starve or dehydrate to death. Nursing or supporting a person in terminal sedation can be extremely distressing. Terminal sedation is accepted by the medical profession and the Catholic Church as an appropriate and religiously ethical last resort, as the stated intention is 'to relieve suffering'. No reporting is involved, and the patient need not even be asked.

Yet if the dying patient requested, "Rather than starve me to death in a coma, with the trauma of having my family watch this slow death, please give me the next few days medication in a single dose", this would be illegal.

As Christians we ask why it is morally acceptable that the slow death procedure should be legal but not the alternative?

In recent years the trend for religious opposition is to use the alleged 'slippery

slope' and the alleged coercion of the elderly and vulnerable, rather than the 'sanctity of life' and the 'thou shalt not Kill' arguments of previous years. This is presumably because the 'Thou shalt not Kill' argument, is easily rebutted by citing the numerous examples of Biblical killing apparently approved or authorised by God. (For example, the story of Noah, or the genocide of the Midianites in Numbers 31.7-9 & 17-18).

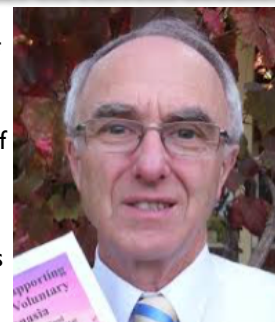
The slippery slope argument has also been refuted by peer reviewed research (Refs <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/article-abstract/2532018>)

Legislation for assisted dying choice should be based on the facts, not religious dogma. The recent Victorian Parliament *Inquiry into End of Life Choice* found no evidence of abuse. Numerous studies in Canada came out strongly in support of assisted dying choice, as did the Supreme Court of Canada, which led to the Canadian Parliament granting all adult Canadians the option under strict guidelines and limitations. Notably the Canadian Medical Association has endorsed the legislation.

We are all aware that the Northern Territory was the first jurisdiction in the world to grant assisted dying in 1996, until this was overturned by 'the Kevin Andrews Bill' in a Catholic-led group during the Howard Government. Oregon in USA passed legislation in 1997, again after fierce Catholic opposition. Oregon has since been joined by Washington State, Vermont, Washington DC, California, Colorado and Montana.

I believe a statement by UK Anglican Canon Rosie Harper eloquently sums up what we would all prefer in an end of life situation. She described the assisted death of her uncle with Dignitas in Switzerland:

"My uncle had a beautiful death, with his family around him - good music, good wine, and a pain-free end. The days that would have followed as he struggled through the end stage of a brain tumour would have been terrible. He had no choice about dying. He did have choice about the manner of his death."



Ian Wood, co-founder, christiansforve.org.au

SAVES

South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society

saves.asn.au

Compassion for suffering
The freedom to choose
Add your voice to the call



SAVES was established in 1983 to campaign for legal, medically assisted choice in end-of-life arrangements. The aim is to relieve suffering by providing choice for people at the end of their life. SAVES works in the community and with Members of Parliament to achieve law reform.

Morgan Poll Nov 2017: 87% support for assisted dying

The latest Morgan Poll shows 87% in favour (up a significant 18% from May 1996). This Snap SMS Survey was conducted on the night of November 2, 2017 with a representative cross-section of 1,386 Australians aged 18+. Liberal Party supporters were 86%, National Party supporters 88%. All ages were 87% support or better except for 25-34's at 78% support. By State: Vic 85%, NSW 84%, Old 88%, WA 89%, SA 90%, Tas 92%

- Roy Morgan Research: [It's Official: Australians support assisted dying or euthanasia](http://www.roymorganresearch.com.au/its-official-australians-support-assisted-dying-or-euthanasia).

Michele Levine, Chief Executive Officer, Roy Morgan Research, says:

"Australians have overwhelmingly backed the right of doctors to administer lethal doses to patients in a result that supports the Victorian Government's euthanasia legislation.

"A large majority of 87% of Australians (up 18% since May 1996) say doctors should allow 'hopelessly ill patients experiencing unrelievable suffering to die' and almost as many, 85% (up 11% since May 1996) say doctors should be allowed to 'give a lethal dose' to a patient with no chance of recovering.

"Support for both contentions is exceedingly strong amongst supporters of all major political parties (above 80% for both questions), amongst both genders (above 80% for both questions), amongst all age groups (above 75% for both questions) and in all Australian States (above 80% for both questions).

"Although the question of euthanasia has always provoked a great deal of debate, the views of the Australian public has decisively moved in favour of the action over the last two decades.

"From the first surveys in the 1940s, 50s and 60s there was a consistent increase in support then between 1987 and 1996 support for doctors allowing hopelessly ill patients to die barely changed (67% in April 1987 cf. 69% in May 1996), while support for allowing doctors to administer a lethal dose actually dropped over the nine years to May 1996 (75% in April 1987 cf. 74% in May 1996).

"Today's results show that, although the Victorian euthanasia legislation is the first time an Australian State has passed legislation allowing euthanasia, the State Government is unlikely to suffer any political fallout from the move."

Roy Morgan
— Research —

Voluntary Euthanasia Advocacy Groups

Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Euthanasia
christiansforve.org.au

Doctors for Assisted Dying Choice
drs4assisteddyingchoice.org

South Australian Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying
facebook: SA Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying
My Body My Choice

facebook: [facebook.com/pages/MY-BODY-MY-Choice-VE](https://www.facebook.com/pages/MY-BODY-MY-Choice-VE)

Voluntary Euthanasia Youth Advocates
facebook: [Support SAVE-YA Law Reform](https://www.facebook.com/SupportSAVEYA)

Lawyers for Death with Dignity
saves.asn.au/lawyers

Resources

Andrew Denton's GoGentleAustralia website
<http://gogentleaustralia.org.au>

SAVES End of Life Choice Newsletters
<http://www.saves.asn.au/newsletters.php>

The Wheeler Centre podcasts Better Off Dead
<http://www.wheelercentre.com/broadcasts/podcasts/better-off-dead>

The Voluntary Euthanasia Story: the epic journey to make it legal - Adelaide forum, June 2015
<http://www.saves.asn.au/resources.php>

