

End of Life Choice



Newsletter on current debates

In places where it's legal, how many people are ending their lives using euthanasia?

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The Victorian Parliament will consider a bill to legalise euthanasia in the second half of 2017. That follows the South Australian Parliament's decision to knock back a voluntary euthanasia bill late last year, and the issue was raised in the run-up to the Western Australian election.

On the ABC's February 27 QandA (held in Melbourne) federal Labor's justice spokesperson, Clare O'Neil, told the audience that in countries where the practice is legal, "very, very small" numbers of people use the laws.

Whether or not you agree with O'Neil's statement depends largely on your interpretation of the subjective term "very, very small", but there is a growing body of data available on how many people are using euthanasia or assisted dying laws in places such as the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Colombia, Canada and, now, seven US states.

Assisted dying and euthanasia

In some jurisdictions, the word "euthanasia" is used to refer to both assisted dying (where the patient himself or herself takes the medication) and to euthanasia (where the doctor administers the medication to the patient). So "euthanasia" can sometimes be used as a broad term to cover a range of actions.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide rates around the world

According to a 2016 peer-reviewed paper published in the respected Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA):

Between 0.3% to 4.6% of all deaths are reported as euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide in jurisdictions where they are legal. The frequency of these deaths increased after legalization ... Euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are increasingly being legalized, remain relatively rare, and primarily involve patients with cancer. Existing data do not indicate widespread abuse of these practices.

The authors of that paper said that 35,598 people died in Oregon in 2015. Of these deaths, 132, or 0.39%, were reported as physician-assisted suicides. The same paper said that in Washington in 2015 there were 166 reported cases of physician-assisted suicide (equating to 0.32% of all deaths in Washington in that year).

Interestingly, the same paper noted that US data show that:

pain is not the main motivation for physician-assisted suicide ... The dominant motives are loss of autonomy and dignity and being less able to enjoy life's activities.

The authors said that in officially reported Belgian cases, pain was the reason for euthanasia in about half of cases. Loss of dignity is mentioned as a reason for 61% of cases in the Netherlands and 52% in Belgium.

The 2016 Victorian parliamentary report quoted from the UK Commission on Assisted Dying, which in turn referenced the work of John Griffiths, Heleen Weyers and Maurice Adams in their book *Euthanasia and Law in Europe*. The UK Commission said:

Griffiths et al observe that there are approximately 62,000 deaths in Switzerland each year and academic studies suggest that between 0.3% and 0.4% of these are assisted suicides. This figure increases to 0.5% of all deaths if suicide tourism is included (assisted suicides of non-Swiss nationals).

Around 3.7% of deaths in the Netherlands in 2015 were due to euthanasia. The Netherlands' regional euthanasia review committees reported that there were 5,516 deaths due to euthanasia in 2015.

That is out of a total of around 148,000 deaths in that year.

A 2012 paper published in The Lancet reported on nationwide surveys on euthanasia in the Netherlands in 1995, 2001, 2005 and 2010:

In 2010, of all deaths in the Netherlands, 2.8% were the result of euthanasia. This rate is higher than the 1.7% in 2005, but comparable with those in 2001 and 1995.



Another Netherlands-based study published in the journal JAMA Internal Medicine reported in 2015 that:

Certainly, not all requests are granted; studies conducted between 1990 and 2011 report rates of granting requests between 32% and 45%.

A 2015 paper in the New England Journal of Medicine about euthanasia rates in the Flanders region of Belgium (the northern half of the country) noted:

The rate of euthanasia increased significantly between 2007 and 2013, from 1.9% to 4.6% of deaths.

Filling in the bigger picture

It can be hard to put these rates in context, but what is clear is that euthanasia is by no means a leading cause of death in countries where it is legal. (See Table over page) For example, Statistics Belgium said that for the year 2012, cardiovascular disease was the most common cause of death (28.8%), and cancer was the second most common cause of death (26%).

And in the Netherlands – where 5,516 of deaths were due to euthanasia in 2015 – more than 12,000 Dutch people died from the effects of dementia in 2014, approximately 10,000 Dutch people died from lung cancer and nearly 9,000 died from a heart attack.

The Conversation, ABC online, March 3, 2017



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.

The 13 jurisdictions which give 180 million people in the world access to assisted dying

Country or USA state/district	Act	Year enacted	Population million (1)	Number of assisted deaths	Year of most recent data	Assisted deaths as % of all deaths
Switzerland	Article 115 of the Swiss Criminal Code (1942)	1942	8.1	742	2014	1.17%
Oregon	Death with Dignity Act (1994)	1997	4.0	132	2015	0.37%
Netherlands	Termination of Life on Request and Assisted Suicide (Review Procedures) Act (2000)	2002	16.9	5516	2015	3.70%
Belgium	Act on Euthanasia (2002)	2002	11.2	2022	2015	1.83%
Montana	Court order	2008	1.0	na		
Washington	Death with Dignity Act (2008)	2009	7.0	202	2015	0.37%
Luxembourg	Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide (Law of March 16, 2009)	2009	0.6	7	2014	0.18%
Vermont	Patient Choice and Control at End of Life (2013)	2013	0.6	8		
Quebec (2)	Bill 52, An Act Respecting End-of-Life Care	2014	0.6	na		
Colombia	Constitutional Court Ruling (1997), Ministerial Guidelines (2015)	1997/2015	48.7			
California	End of Life Options Act (2015)	2016	38.8	na		
Canada	An Act to amend the Criminal Code and to make related amendments to other Acts (medical assistance in dying) (2016)	2016	36 744 (3)			
Colorado	Proposition 106, End of Life Options Act (2016)	2016	5.5	na		
Washington DC	Death with Dignity Act (2016)	2017	0.7	na		
Total/av			179.7			1.27%

(1) Population in year of most recent data; (2) Overtaken by Canada law; (3) Five months mid June to Mid December

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

Voluntary Euthanasia Youth Advocates
facebook: Support SAVE-YA Law Reform

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>

