

# End of Life Choice



Newsletter on current debates

## The community speaks

The 2012 Newspann poll on voluntary euthanasia found that over 80% of Australians support choice. In addition, voters said that "whether voluntary euthanasia is legalised" was their third most important issue, after the National Disability Insurance Scheme and treatment of asylum seekers. Media coverage attests to this, with nearly 700 television, radio and print items published in the Australian media in the 12 months to June 2015.

A representative sample from *Letters to the Editor* pages of Australia's mainstream press are highlighted below.



### Limits to palliative care

Evidence concerning the limits to palliative care was a common theme. One correspondent stated that choice for assisted dying 'should be part of the palliation package'. Other writers gave personal testimonies on loved ones with pain relief curtailed by medical staff 'in case they are seen to be assisting death', or staff who 'were in fear of not being seen to assist a resident pass away, even to the point of withholding pain relief'. One writer contended that the minority of people who cannot be helped with palliative care 'fall under the heading of "collateral damage"'. Other writers were concerned about the close links between religion and palliative care services. Another correspondent noted a consensus between palliative care organisations and voluntary euthanasia societies, both aiming to alleviate suffering, but noted the desire of many to 'leave at sunset, and not go into the darkness'.

### The scope of suffering

A key theme was the reality of the cumulative extent of societal suffering under prevailing law. One writer made the point that 'the minority should be free to suffer' but argued that they can 'offer no argument why suffering should be imposed on others'. Many spoke of the horror of 'protracted' and 'wanton' suffering, including the view that 'we all die, but far too many people die horribly'. One person



stated 'I fear experiencing 10 years of dying hell' [as had a relative], with another maintaining that 'It doesn't matter when you die, it only matters how'. The unfairness of people being forced to travel overseas to the Dignitas Clinic in Switzerland to achieve a peaceful death was also noted. Unfairness is then compounded by inequity in access to assistance to die. More privileged people have access to information and the finances to act on their wishes. One writer stated *'It's pot luck as to whether a dying person with untreatable suffering can ask and receive the means to die with dignity, or whether they suffer needlessly through their last days or weeks. If other medical relief from suffering were subject to the same random whimsy there would be outrage'*.

### Compassion versus a punitive law

'Dying with dignity is not just about individual choice. It's about a society based on compassion' was one view. Another correspondent noted that 'the law does not distinguish between compassionate assistance and murder'. One writer speaking of the possibility of prosecution if merely being present to comfort a suffering person who took their own life spoke of being subject to the terror of facing prosecution under a 'punitive' law. Another stated 'there's nothing civilised about the increasingly alarming police investigation' which is mandatory under law.

### Religious influence

People wrote about the pervasive influence of religion in end of life choice across a range of contexts. One [Catholic]

correspondent stated 'what right does a man who calls himself Pope have to pontificate on yet another individual choice?... My grandmother's [bad] experience is not an isolated case among Catholic families'. Another writer argued 'I don't care if religious organisations or followers think this a sinful idea. This body is mine, and I will decide how it should die - my body, my death, my choice'. Others pointed to the perceived hypocrisy of 'God directed killing in the Old Testament'. The issue of a conscience vote in the context of an over-representation of religious MPs did not escape comment, including the view that 'a conscience vote is obviously a useful government tool for not getting legislation through'.

### The need for political will

There are many MPs who publicly support law reform, but many correspondents lamented the general lack of political will. One stated 'all that is lacking is the will, the compassion and the political backbone for the government to listen to the conversation. The government already has a mandate to introduce assisted dying laws. Apparently not all "mandates" are equal'.



Another said 'I'm ashamed of the lack of courage of our parliamentary representatives in spite of the public's high level of support...' One asked 'why can't the pollies tell us in plain language what they think and what they'd do if elected'. In one troubling indictment of a perceived lack of political will one writer argued 'perhaps parliamentary silence on this matter is because the dead do not vote'.

One voice stood out amongst all others by bridging the myriad views represented above on the need for law reform. *This writer reminded us that, ultimately, 'assisted dying is not a choice between life and death but a choice between two ways of dying'.*

# 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.

## SAVE-YA Syndicated Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Youth Advocates

Facebook: Support SAVE-YA Law Reform



A national youth lobby group which aims to provide a youth voice in support of legalising voluntary euthanasia in all States and Territories. Members between ages 18 and 35 are encouraged to join, make contact with their local MP and inform them of their support for voluntary euthanasia law reform.

## Christians Supporting Choice For Voluntary Euthanasia

[christiansforve.org.au](http://christiansforve.org.au)

We are Christians who believe that, as a demonstration of love and compassion, those with a terminal or hopeless illness should have the option of a pain-free, peaceful and dignified death with legal voluntary euthanasia. The overwhelming majority of Australian Christians support choice for voluntary euthanasia.



## South Australian Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying

Facebook: SA Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying

We are a group of passionate nurses who believe in our patient's right to choose the end of life care they wish. The group provides a forum for the nursing voice and perspective on legalising voluntary euthanasia and other patient choices in end of life care.



## MY BODY MY Choice-VE

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

MBMC provides a voice for people with disability in the VE reform debate. MBMC represents the interests of people with disabilities who wish to exercise choice in all aspects of their life, including choice at the end of life, with the view that choice and control are a fundamental human right for everyone.

MBMC argues that people with disabilities know how it feels to lose personal autonomy through their ongoing fight for self-determination, independent living and disability rights.

MBMC believes that people with disabilities, who have struggled to control their own lives and bodies, must be allowed to maintain control and autonomy throughout their life, especially at its end.



## Doctors for Voluntary Euthanasia Choice

[drs4vechoice.org](http://drs4vechoice.org)



We are a national organisation of Australian medical practitioners, both current and retired, who are committed to having a legal choice of providing information and assistance to rational adults, who, for reasons of no realistic chance of cure or relief from intolerable symptoms, would like to gently end their lives. Assistance may be by doctor provision of medication for the patient to consume, or by doctor-administration.

## Lawyers for Death with Dignity

[saves.asn.au/lawyers](http://saves.asn.au/lawyers)

Lawyers for Death with Dignity acknowledges the need for people with profound suffering to have the legal choice for a medically assisted and dignified death. The current law says suicide is not illegal, but assisting suicide is. People in a terminal state may have profound, unbearable suffering and be in the undignified position of being unable to end their life without assistance. Advances in medicine have improved life expectancy, but South Australian law has not changed to reflect the often forgotten deterioration of quality of life that a longer life expectancy may bring.



**BREAKING NEWS BREAKING NEWS BREAKING NEWS**



**Rocking the vote for law reform**

DyingForChoice.com is a new Australian website dedicated to responsible assisted-dying law reform. It provides up-to-date and evidence-based information for the general public, policy makers, healthcare workers, researchers, students, media and others.

A focus for the website is to counter the misinformation promulgated by those opposed to voluntary euthanasia law reform. The website will be a source of facts, figures, analysis and argument presented in an easily accessible format. Blogs and news updates will provide comment on current debates.

The website has been developed by Neil Francis, Past President of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies and Foundation Chairman and CEO of YourLastRight.com. The website provides important resources and analysis, as well as blogs, news, events, a monthly newsletter and media alerts. The website includes an informative submission to the Victorian Parliamentary enquiry.

<http://www.dyingforchoice.com>