

# End of Life Choice



Newsletter on current debates

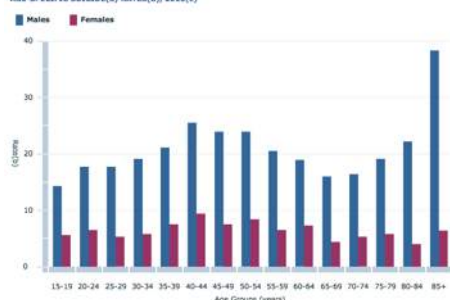
## Elderly Suicide

*The premature death of elderly people through suicide has been identified by both the South Australian and Victorian coroners as an increasing societal question.*

**The ABS and State coroners report that four people over 70 die from suicide in Australia each week. More than half the suicides are from hanging (56%).**

In 2013, death from suicide was highest for the age group of men over 85, at 38 per 100,000. (Source ABS 3303, see below)

AGE-SPECIFIC SUICIDE (a) RATES (b), 2013 (c)



The South Australian coroner, Mark Johns, has called for a public debate about the "isolated" circumstances in which some older terminally ill Australians are ending their lives. (ABC, Feb 6 2015)

"I have seen a number of instances where an elderly person makes a decision to end their life and the characteristics of these situations to me are loneliness, isolation, solitude," he said.

"By necessity these people have to be alone when they carry out the act to end their own life because of the law that we all live under."

"I think the public should be aware of what's occurring and that should inform a public discussion," he said.

Frances Coombe, President of the South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society, wrote of her lifelong friend and mentor, Robert Brown, known as Browny:

*On January 28th 2015, Browny ended his life, on his own terms, at the age of 94. He was fast going blind from macular degeneration, to the point where it was difficult to care for himself.*

*Browny was a man of independence and fortitude. He was known as the mover and shaker for conservation in the 70s, had published research works and had been consulted widely for his expertise by governments of the time.*



**Robert Brown, "Browny", Conservationist**

*He had adapted to his failing eyesight, hearing and cardiac problems with characteristic doggedness and humour. "There are many more people worse off," he told me.*

*Up to the week before he died, Browny would catch the bus into town, buying lunch and a take home meal for tea. As he was noticing daily deterioration of his eyesight he worried that he would inadvertently step in front of a car, thus causing great trouble for the driver. Either that, he said, or he would be injured from a fall and not be able to return home, instead being obliged to enter a nursing home. From there he would have no control over the way he died.*

*He told me that he would soon end his own life. He had researched the means thoroughly and practised many times, by necessity, due to not being able to see the mechanism and having to feel his way through the procedure.*

*All his life Browny had been an avid reader with a relish for learning and research.*

*Now he was unable to continue reading despite using the best of assistance devices.*

*Due to his failing vision he spent his days looking for things he had misplaced or dropped and cleaning up from knocking things over. His necessarily slow and careful movements meant hours in the day lost with little achieved. All this he bore, without feeling sorry for himself, always ready with a smile when we met.*

*Browny wrote a letter to the SA coroner stating that he would be grateful if his*

*cause of death was given as "rational self-assisted euthanasia". He said there were many people who would attest to the fact that he was not depressed. He was still interested in life and did not want to leave his friends but he did not want to lose control.*

*Robert Brown served in both the Australian and the British navies during the war, was a well known conservationist, and a generous philanthropist. Browny was a life member of SAVES. It is shameful that the law failed him, leaving him to die alone.*

In 2015 Marshall Perron, former NT Chief Minister, who in 1995 introduced the first voluntary euthanasia law in the world, wrote to all state coroners asking them to make findings about whether the lack of voluntary euthanasia laws caused older people to pre-emptively end their lives sooner than they would have otherwise.

South Australia's Mark Johns was the only coroner to respond. (pictured below)



He agreed that there was an under-reported phenomena of older terminally ill people ending their lives, but rejected holding inquests to prove pre-emptive decisions.

"That is a very difficult inquiry to embark on and one where it's difficult to establish any objective evidence," Mr Johns said.

**Browny's premature death highlights the urgent need to provide peace of mind to people that if their life becomes unbearable, and their options for treatment hopeless, they will be legally able to say "enough is enough". They will not have to die alone and in fear, as Browny did.**

SAVES has been working since 1983 to legalise voluntary euthanasia so that Browny and others do not have to die alone, earlier than they would otherwise choose, and in a manner lacking surety and dignity.

# 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

Beverley Broadbent asked her GP, Dr Nick Carr, to promise to kill her if she had a stroke or developed dementia. He said he could not do that, however, he wrote her a prescription for the maximum possible quantity of a barbiturate, thus giving her the means to end her life. Eight years later (in 2013), when she was aged 83 and had been diagnosed with breast cancer, she did end her life, although using a different drug than that Carr had prescribed.

Carr also promised Broadbent that he would put on her death certificate that she had died from a heart attack, because she said she wanted "no fuss." He kept his promise to her, although he was aware she had chosen to end her life. What he did not know was that, believing it should be lawful for a doctor to assist a patient in her circumstances to die, she had contacted *The Age* and spoken about her intentions. Carr did not know about this.

After Broadbent's death, *The Age* ran a front-page article about her planned death. The coroner asked Carr to explain his death certificate. He acknowledged he knew Broadbent had ended her own life, and revealed his earlier prescription. The coroner reported the matter to the Australian Health Practitioners Regulation Authority. ***The board considered what Carr had done and chose the lightest possible sanction – a reprimand that has no effect on his ability to continue to practise medicine.*** (Prof Peter Singer, *The Age*, 2.3.16)