

End of Life Choice

Oct 27 2014

Newsletter on current debates: nurses support choice in dying

A member of *SA Nurses Supporting Choices in Dying* has shared the following story from her current experience caring for her mother.

Margaret is 81 and lives in high level residential care in a well-resourced and highly regarded facility. The staff are caring and kind. Margaret was placed into care as she could not care for herself at home, having lost her husband to cancer a decade ago. Each time her daughter visited, her mother asked the same question "Haven't you got a pill for me – something I can take



to end it all?" She was missing her husband terribly, and her dementia was rapidly causing her increasing emotional and physical distress. Over the last 12 months, her condition has worsened. She is dying. She can now no longer voice this request and barely recognises her daughter. Her weight has plummeted and her world is full of fear and anxiety.

Nurses tell you that the overwhelming majority of their patients wish to live out their lives naturally, with no hastening of death. However, experience reinforces that even the best of palliative care does not relieve all suffering. For this small group of people, nurses believe that well-constructed voluntary euthanasia legislation, with every appropriate safeguard, gives the dying patient the choice to end their life in a peaceful manner, in the place and at the time of their choosing.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) position statement on end of life choice (reviewed and re-endorsed May 2012) reads in part

Society's approach to voluntary euthanasia should be informed by the moral dimensions of respect for self-determination, concern for quality of life and compassion for those who suffer. Registered nurses, enrolled nurses and registered midwives have a professional responsibility to stay reliably informed about the ethical, legal, cultural and clinical implications of voluntary euthanasia. We support legislative reform so that persons with a terminal or incurable illness that creates unrelieved, profound suffering shall have the right to choose to die with dignity in a manner acceptable to them and shall not be compelled to suffer beyond their wishes.

In addition, the ANMF offers support for those who conscientiously object:

Legislative reform must ensure that no individual, group or organisation shall be compelled against their will to either participate or not participate in an assisted or supported death of a sufferer.

Just as a person suffering intolerably at the end of life may want to choose voluntary euthanasia, so too the nurse will have the choice to not be involved in their patient's care at this point.

Nurses are in a unique and privileged position to participate in this debate.

- in Intensive Care Units, nurses spend up to 12 hours each shift caring for the needs of the dying
- in clinical wards and hospice environments, nurses spend between 8-10 hours per shift caring for the needs of the dying, often for days at a time, to ensure continuity of care. This can take an emotional toll on nurses, but is valuable for both patient and family to build rapport and trust in the staff caring for them at this important time.

- nurses also care for the family and friends of the dying, offering support, counselling, a cup of tea and a comforting hug when situations become overwhelming

Sometimes, during conversations with the patient, partner or family, nurses are asked "Can anything be done to make the suffering stop?" "How much longer does the suffering have to go on?" "Can't you give more pain relief?" The only answer nurses can now give is "We are doing all we can." Many nurses go home at the end of their shift



and barely make it to their car, before the tears start to flow. Nursing students are taught at university to "self-protect" and not become emotionally involved. But nurses are human, and in caring for their patient for days on end, they often witness unbearable suffering, and they are affected.

Nurses are on the front line in end of life care. It is challenging work on many levels. Not only can caring for the dying patient be physically demanding, but also psychologically as well. It takes a special kind of nurse to devote themselves to this area of work – and nurses know that if the wider community could see even some of the misery created by the current prohibition on voluntary euthanasia, then the clamour for law reform would be overwhelming.

Pictures: left, Margaret in 2013; right, Margaret now, in 2014

South Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society

saves.asn.au

SAVES was established in 1983 by volunteers to campaign for a South Australian law that provides for "medically assisted" end-to-life, as a right, in appropriate circumstances, and with defined safeguards. SAVES aims to raise public debate to a point where our Members of Parliament enact a VE law which provides everyone with the choice to end prolonged and painful suffering.



Doctors for Voluntary Euthanasia Choice

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.



Christians supporting choice for Voluntary Euthanasia

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.



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 Australian States/Territories. Members between the ages of 18 and 35 are encouraged to join and make contact with their local MP's to inform them of their support for voluntary euthanasia law reform.



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. In many cases, those who are in terminal states have profound, unbearable suffering and are put in the undignified position of being unable to end their life without assistance. The medical profession has advanced their discipline to improve life expectancy, but appropriate changes have not been reflected in the South Australian law to deal with an often forgotten deterioration of quality of life that this may bring. saves.asn.au/lawyers



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 that they wish. The group provides a forum for the nursing voice and perspective on the legislation of voluntary euthanasia and other patient choices in end of life care in South Australia.