

End of Life Choice

Sept 14 2014

Newsletter on current debates: defining voluntary euthanasia

Euthanasia means the act of bringing about a good death - one that is peaceful, gentle and relaxed. *Voluntary* euthanasia is a peaceful, gentle and relaxed death brought about at the express wish of the person.

In all nine jurisdictions around the world where voluntary euthanasia is allowed by law, safeguards have been included in the legislation which provide for medical support, a waiting period after a request is made, provision to change your mind and an intent to provide people who are suffering unbearably, the choice to die at a time and place of their choosing, in the company of friends and family.



The evidence from other jurisdictions shows that up to a third of people who request voluntary euthanasia do not make use of the prescription or medication. Once a person knows that they have control over their end of life arrangements, and that they will not be abandoned by their doctor if all treatments fail, their last few months become more tolerable and more relaxed.

Reports to Parliaments in those jurisdictions where voluntary euthanasia is legal, for example the state of Oregon in the USA, which passed legislation in support of voluntary euthanasia 20 years ago, show that the majority of people who make use of voluntary euthanasia are well educated, most with tertiary qualifications, and have terminal cancer. Nearly all – 97% - died at home.

Profound suffering is multifaceted and the three most frequently mentioned end-of-life concerns in Oregon were loss of autonomy (93%), decreasing ability to participate in activities that made life enjoyable (89%) and loss of dignity (73%).



The majority of Australians consistently support legalising voluntary euthanasia, as reported in Newspoll. All through the 1990s support was over 70% and it has been over 80% since 2007. The most recent Newspoll (2012) showed 82% support.

It is widely acknowledged, including by Palliative Care Australia and the Australian Medical Association, that even the best of palliative care cannot help all patients – between 5-10% find their suffering so unbearable that they persistently request an assisted death. Our palliative and medical care is highly regarded, but it can never be 100% effective.

The Australia 21 Roundtable report of 2013, a national discussion between supporters and opponents of voluntary euthanasia, came down in support of law reform.

There are two main terms used in the discussion about choice in dying:

Voluntary Euthanasia refers to the administration by a doctor of medication to bring about death at the request of a patient.

Physician Assisted Dying refers to the provision of medication to enable a patient to bring about their own death.

In South Australia it is currently legal for a person to take their own life, to have their treatment withdrawn or withheld (such as artificial respiration, life saving medication, nutrition and hydration) and for pain relieving drugs to be administered in a way which hastens their death. These options do not have the safeguards of protection, accountability and transparency included in voluntary euthanasia legislation in other jurisdictions.

Opponents of voluntary euthanasia often suggest that legislating to allow people to make the decision to die will result in the murder of people with disabilities, elderly relatives and people who are taking up space in a hospital. There is no evidence to support this claim. There *is* evidence that well thought through, controlled and medically supported voluntary euthanasia legislation gives people peace of mind and makes them less likely to take pre-emptive action at an extremely stressful time. Former vocal opponents of voluntary euthanasia, such as the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord George Carey, have



come to realize that their opposition to voluntary euthanasia promotes and prolongs misery, pain and suffering for people who are already suffering unbearably.

Analysis of the data and legislation supporting voluntary euthanasia overseas, indicates that possibly 20 or 30 South Australians a year may make use of voluntary euthanasia legislation.

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, including the choice of voluntary euthanasia. Our members come from vastly different backgrounds and age groups but we all share the same goal.