

Voluntary Assisted Dying Enquiry

I am very conscious of how difficult any discussion is in this area. I do not accept that the moral questions involved are 'black & white'. This can be an extraordinarily emotive issue – and that is not often helpful.

I am concerned that the narrative around reasons why VAD should be accepted centre on the claim that no one should have to endure high levels of pain in their lives. The understanding I have developed from conversations with professionals and from personal experience and the case I would like to put forward to this Committee is that given appropriate Palliative Care, no one in this country should die in pain. It is simply avoidable.

Along with my family, I sat with my younger brother who died of Cancer aged 26. For the last two weeks of his life, he was in Mt Olivet hospital in Brisbane. Unlike his time in a general hospital, these last two weeks were a blessing. Tim was kept reasonably comfortable and cognizant. He was able to leave this world surrounded by people who loved and cared for him. We had a chance to say goodbye. His doctor at that time assured me that no one in Australia should die in pain. That was in 1988.

The provision of accessible and quality Palliative Care is essential. Pain management is a specialty and should be adequately funded and supported. I worry that for stretched government budgets, VAD can be a much cheaper alternative. Excellent provision of Palliative Care for all Queenslanders, regardless of Postcode or Income will be, and should be, very expensive. But we must make that a priority.

Proponents of widely available VAD will also understandably point out that those suffering terminal illnesses may not wish to be a burden to their loved ones or to society. Those in our community and in our families who are really unwell or in the final stages of life call the rest of us to Compassion.

We are called on to care for those who can no longer care for themselves and that is a very good thing. It may not be something we wish for, but how we as individuals and as a community treat those most in need is the very indicator of the quality of community we wish to create. We all need opportunities to be selfless.

I certainly understand the sentiment of those in the final stages of life not wishing to lose control of their lives and to have to rely on others to do for them what they have always done for themselves. But maybe, just maybe, that process of 'letting go' has benefits for others that are essential.

It is a sad reality of life today that we hear more stories of 'elder abuse'. It seems to be sadly more common for older men and women to be ill treated by members of their families or others – often for financial gain. VAD legislated in this context may unleash a whole series of very unintended consequences.

For those, like me, who have very serious reservations about legalising Euthanasia, the area that does cause some degree of conflict is for that very small group of people who may suffer from long term, degenerative and terminal diseases like Cystic Fibrosis, Huntington's Disease or Motor Neurone Disease. In this narrow group of cases, patients slowly waste away to the point of suffocation.

I can more easily understand the reasons people in those categories may have for access to end of life strategies.

The preservation and value of human life is one of the corner stones on which society has been built. Doctors, through their Hippocratic Oath, promise to uphold those values. The legislation under discussion has the potential to fundamentally change the society in which we live. This meeting is an indicator of the importance of this issue.

I would urge extreme caution for legislators who might desire to reduce the value we place on human life. The experience of countries who have already adopted VAD legislation is a sobering reminder of how easy it is, once the legislation is in place, to broaden the scope of the practice. I am not a great supporter of the 'slippery slope' arguments in this area or others but I am a student of history. It is an immutable law of history that if we don't learn the lessons of history, we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. The term 'Euthanasia' was given to us by the ancient Greeks. Many societies and political leaders since that time have attempted to legislate for a 'Good Death'. Not many have done so well.