


18th July, 2015

Ms Lilian Topic
Secretary
The Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
MELBOURNE 3002

Dear Ms Topic

Re: Inquiry into End of Life Choices – Submission

As sure as we are living, we are going to die one day. When vulnerable, whilst in pain or suffering depression and loneliness, a person will find it hard to make an informed decision about their own death. With prompting, a person in this position may be inclined to believe they are a burden on society as they feel unable to have productive input. Therefore **we require good palliative care freely available to all**, through hospitalisation or care at home, care which allows a person to feel valued and given appropriate time to let go.

Each person has the right to die peacefully, living the last months, days or hours with dignity and support. Coping with pain is difficult, as is suffering depression, but as humans we are required to support each other in living as well as dying, only then are our lives dignified by a peaceful death. Palliative care needs to be increased for the dying and available to support family and friends during this confusing and difficult time.

I have known a young man who at age fifteen chose to take his own life. His family and friends were left feeling devastated, empty, emotionally anxious, and every day we ask ourselves "why?" We stepped out through the following years in a trance. Twenty-five years later there are still no decisive answers and I am still saddened by the fact that he chose suicide without giving his close friends and family the opportunity to talk to him and maybe support him to resolve his problems. Why did he want to leave those who loved him, did he realise how much he hurt those he left behind? I think not. Everyone who knew him enjoyed him. The best we could do was to support his family, let them know we cared about him and them, and were trying to understand their grief. I still find it hard to imagine how this very caring family is coping with their loss. It causes undefinable grief to love someone who might chose to no longer be with you or entrust you to share in this difficult part of their life. Pain can be treated. When suffering pain, confusion or depression, one is not of sound mind, which might cause people to wish to end their lives. Everyone needs support from family and friends throughout their lives, especially towards the end of their lives during sickness and old age. Readily available palliative care can help people to die with dignity, through supporting the person and their loved ones through this emotional roller-coaster, giving pain relief and making them comfortable and creating an environment of reflection and love. Palliative care gives the family time to talk and grieve together, with the support of the amazing palliative care staff who can guide the distressed family through this difficult time, ensuring it is peaceful and may even be beautiful.

My dear mother died before her time, physically fit, hard-working and beautiful at age seventy-six. She played an important role in the lives of her children and grandchildren. We took her to hospital

in a state of confusion and she was diagnosed with tumours on the brain. Following discussion with the doctor, Mum and all the family, Mum decided that she did not wish to have surgery, which she would most likely not survive, or any other intervention as it was not likely to give her any relief. She told us that she just wanted to be with Dad, who had died in her arms three years earlier. Each day from 8am – 8pm she had at least one member of her large family by her side. We had time to show her how much we loved her, she showed us the same affection, as she had done all our lives. Together we told stories of the family and had many laughs. After two weeks she was transferred into palliative care at Jessie MacPherson, where she commented that she felt like she was already in heaven because they put her tired body onto a feather down mattress, and the nursing staff were so joyously attentive to our mother and to us. By this time she had suffered an aneurism and was not expected to survive long. She was reasonably alert but at times was confused. The nurses attended quietly to the daily living requirements of our mother, whilst the family were able to comfort, show love and listen to each other. Mum didn't talk much in these last few days but we knew she was listening. The nurses prepared us each day for what was happening and told us that amazingly she showed no sign of pain and was given no morphine. She was relaxed, even seemed happy. Only a week after entering palliative care, the nurses advised us that she may not survive the day. Our mother waited until each of her seven children, together with their partners, arrived at her bedside, individually holding her and talking to her. We sensed that she was saying good-bye by touching us as we talked and managing to kiss us as we hugged her gently. As the last member of the family arrived and held her, she seemed to know that we were all there. She seemed to look around and we sensed by her calmness that she was saying "you all look after each other now as I have no energy left, but I will continue to love you and will watch over you from above." She closed her eyes and let go of her wonderful life on earth in peace. We all cried quietly but knew she was happy.

Some months prior to our mother's passing, she put a deposit on a unit being built attached to supported residential and nursing care. She knew she was unwell and said she did not wish to be a **burden to us**. We challenged her, as each member of the family was very happy to have her live with them, the same as she had done for her own mother. But she chose to be independent knowing that each family would have her to stay as often as she liked. If the law said that she could legally take a pill and end her life so that she would no longer feel a burden to us or society, we would have been left absolutely devastated. She had been a caring nurse, wife, mother and friend. She could never be a burden, but her unselfish mind could have led her to think this way. Had she legally taken **the opportunity to hasten her death**, we would have suffered guilt and distress for the rest of our lives knowing she wanted to be less of a burden to us. Instead we spent those absolutely beautiful three weeks with her, especially the amazing week in palliative care where the staff cared for our mother and her grieving family and dignified her with a peaceful death. Mum gave us undying love throughout her life and whilst she was dying. I believe she died without pain because she had no regrets. She knew we loved her. Our wonderful memories will be with us throughout our lives. **Euthanasia is confronting, violent and distressing for those left behind.**

Doctors and nurses do not agree with this intervention into someone's life. I cannot understand any benefit to changing a law which protects the community. This change is about assisting people to die and is open to abuse, as people dying and in pain can be so vulnerable. Governments should be spending more money on palliative care and bring dignity to people living their last days.

Yours sincerely



Mrs Susan Agostino