

Inquiry into End of Life Choices – Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Committee

Dear Committee,

I offer you this submission in the hope that it will assist you in making sensible recommendations for much needed changes to legislation that currently restricts the rights of individuals to choose how they want to live (or end) the final stages of their life.

What is happening now?

I have personal experience of family loss, both in mid-life and in later life. For the purpose of comparing these, please consider the following:

Carol

- Suffered a prolonged illness associated with primary breast cancer and subsequent secondary cancers in bones, lungs and other internal organs
- Multiple operations to delay the inevitable
- Hip joint replaced due to destruction of the bones
- Needles though back into lungs to drain fluid
- No choice or control. Had to endure operation after operation, procedure after procedure with no hope of recovery.
- Final hours were a panic; family scrambled to be there.

Frank

- End of life due to age and loss bodily functions
- Able to plan with family
- Supportive medico in attendance
- Quick and painless ending through administration of a life ending drug

I ask you, 'Which ending would you like to have for a member of your family?'

Both of the above were real experiences for me. Are you shocked? Why ... because you think the second was against the law? That's my point exactly.

'Carol' was my wife. She died at the age of 50 after fighting cancer for 8 years. She had 4 years in 'remission' after the initial diagnosis, surgery and chemotherapy. But the last 2 years were a downward spiral of more operations, procedures and chemotherapy from which there was no escape, and no ability to control the process or the ending.

In reality, 'Frank' was the family cat and for him it was accepted practice in the community, and quite legal, to end his life to avoid further suffering. Why shouldn't this be so for a human member of the family – being allowed to die at a time of their choosing, painlessly and quickly? It should be a person's right.

In the wider community many people are suffering similar drawn out endings in their lives. Some of this occurs in nursing homes or palliative care facilities where 'care' is given to make people 'comfortable' and prolong their lives until nature takes its course. For many, they and their families accept this, provided they are not in pain. Such facilities play an important part in the community.

However, what about people who are suffering from incurable and debilitating diseases or conditions that make their daily lives a living hell? Or older people who consider that they have had a good life and want to be sure they can avoid the high probability of spending their final months or years in a nursing home or palliative care?

What is currently lacking is the ability for these people to **choose** how and when they wish their life to end. They deserve the right to choose to end their life, just as others may choose to continue theirs.

Current legislation in Australia does not allow such choices to be made and implemented. It is illegal to assist someone end their life. As a result some people who do want to control the end of their life resort to either suicide, in ways that can adversely impact the welfare of others such as train drivers and emergency services personnel, or illegal drugs such as Nembutal.

Various studies and polls have shown widespread support for allowing voluntary euthanasia. The demand within the community for such individual control is evidenced by the existence of groups such as Exit International, Dying with Dignity and the Voluntary Euthanasia Party, which provide advice to people but are unable to directly assist them.

Legislative change

Voluntary euthanasia, or assisted suicide, has been legalised in a few countries already including Switzerland, Belgium, Luxemburg, Netherlands and a handful of states within USA according to a recent report on TV. I am not familiar with the specifics in each country, but Australia should examine the legislation in these countries and implement something similar sooner rather than later.

There will need to be some safeguards within the legislation to prevent potential abuse, but I see a real need to provide for the fundamental right of a person to have end of life choices available to them as the primary and most important objective of any new legislation.

Conclusion

Please do not waste this opportunity to undertake a serious and worthwhile review of current practices and legislation in other countries and to make some serious recommendations for significant changes to current legislation in Australia.

I hope that when I get to the age of wanting to avoid a slow and debilitating decline in my own life I do not have to resort to jumping in front of a train.

Yours sincerely,

David Hubbard

