

Submission to the Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry - End of Life Choices - Law Reform

I have not had that much exposure to death and dying, but enough to know that I fully support dying with dignity as a personal choice that every Victorian deserves.

1964, Ballarat, Victoria, my grandmother aged 59 years and 11 months died of cancer. She had been extremely unwell for a number of years suffering the effects of cervical cancer. Her last twelve months were spent in our family home a bedridden invalid, nauseous and in constant pain. Eventually her cancer had spread to her lungs. Hospitalised, she died a horrible death drowning in her own body fluids. Her doctor reluctant to administer morphine because she could become addicted. So many years of life lost and what a dreadful, distressing end to her existence.

In contrast, 50 years later

2014, The Netherlands, my brother-in-law aged 80 and suffering from cancer had a gentle death in comparison. He was able to settle his affairs, say his goodbyes and set the date for his last day. His death occurred in a hospital setting, with his closest family present, a quick, clean and comfortable end to his life. For his relatives in Australia, being told ahead of time the date his death was to occur, seemed unusual – but for the Dutch such information is taken in a very matter of a fact way. For it is a normal part of Dutch society. We were told of the appointed time, no fuss, no bother, so civilised and to me expressing a very caring attitude towards a loved one's death. To die in the Netherlands would be a blessing when compared to what goes on in Australian Hospitals and Hospices. For in the Netherlands the aims are to alleviate a person's pain and suffering and make death as pain free as possible. Their laws and social systems have accommodated "Dying with Dignity" for decades now.

It seems to me that in the Australian context the arguments against dying with dignity have for decades prevented legal and political powers moving forward. The debate has for too long been hijacked by religious zealots, vocal fringe groups such as the "Right to Life" and nervous politicians too worried about getting re-elected. However now in 2015 social values and our attitude toward death and dying have changed. The time is right for Victoria to introduce some real choice in this matter.

Please don't let this Inquiry be taken up by the notion of the need for increased palliative care as an answer or an outcome – this would sideline the true issue. Ending one's life is a very personal decision. It should not be hamstrung by laws and legislation preventing such choice. How many husbands and wives and adult children to that end, have risked gaol when procuring medications and other means to assist a loved one to end their life? It would be wonderful if "Dying with Dignity" (euthanasia as the more clinical term) with the proper controls and checks in place was available in Victoria. A quiet, controlled and planned death with little pain involved would indeed be an act of love and care and kindness in our community. I hope the Victorian Parliament is brave enough to have something done about this issue and that something done in this current Parliament.

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