20 July 2015

Ms Lilian Topic
Secretary
Legal & Social Issues Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
Melbourne VIC 3002

By email: lsic@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Ms Topic

Victorian Legislative Council’s Legal and Social Issues Committee inquiry into End of Life Choices

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the Committee’s inquiry into End of Life Choices. This response is provided jointly by AHPRA and the fourteen National Boards established under the Health Practitioner Regulation National Law as in force in each state and territory.

While some professions are more commonly involved in end of life care, most National Boards’ Codes of Conduct or equivalent documents provide guidance to practitioners about caring for patients towards the end of their life. Examples from some National Boards’ Codes of Conduct are attached.

We hope this information assists the Committee’s consideration of these sensitive issues.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment and please do not hesitate to contact Chris Robertson on (03) 8708 8037 if you have any queries.

Yours sincerely

Martin Fletcher
Chief Executive Officer
Extract from the Medical Board of Australia’s Good Medical Practice

3.12 End-of-life care

Doctors have a vital role in assisting the community to deal with the reality of death and its consequences. In caring for patients towards the end of their life, good medical practice involves:

1. Taking steps to manage a patient’s symptoms and concerns in a manner consistent with their values and wishes.
2. Providing or arranging appropriate palliative care.
3. Understanding the limits of medicine in prolonging life and recognising when efforts to prolong life may not benefit the patient.
4. Understanding that you do not have a duty to try to prolong life at all cost. However, you do have a duty to know when not to initiate and when to cease attempts at prolonging life, while ensuring that your patients receive appropriate relief from distress.
5. Accepting that patients have the right to refuse medical treatment or to request the withdrawal of treatment already started.
6. Respecting different cultural practices related to death and dying.
7. Striving to communicate effectively with patients and their families so they are able to understand the outcomes that can and cannot be achieved.
8. Facilitating advance care planning.
9. Taking reasonable steps to ensure that support is provided to patients and their families, even when it is not possible to deliver the outcome they desire.
10. Communicating bad news to patients and their families in the most appropriate way and providing support for them while they deal with this information.
11. When your patient dies, being willing to explain, to the best of your knowledge, the circumstances of the death to appropriate members of the patient’s family and carers, unless you know the patient would have objected.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Chinese Medicine, Chiropractic, Dental, Medical Radiation Practice, Occupational Therapy, Optometry, Osteopathy, Pharmacy, Physiotherapy and Podiatry Boards of Australia include similar wording in their Code of Conduct which are published on their websites, accessible from www.ahpra.gov.au.

Registered nurses, nurse practitioners and enrolled nurses have a key role in the provision of end of life care to their patients. The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia has a number of documents that guide nurses in their professional practice; these include the Code of Ethics, Professional Boundaries and Code for Professional Conduct. While these documents do not specifically refer to the provision of end of life care they do guide nurses in the provision of safe, effective and respectful care that considers the needs of the individual in respect to their care. In additional the Registered nurse competency standards state: The role of the registered nurse includes promotion and maintenance of health and prevention of illness for individuals with physical or mental illness, disabilities and/or rehabilitation needs, as well as alleviation of pain and suffering at the end stage of life.

The Psychology Board of Australia has adopted the Australian Psychological Society Code of Ethics for the psychology profession. While the Code of Ethics doesn’t make specific reference to end of life care, it provides the ethical principles (respect for the rights and dignity of people and peoples, propriety and integrity) that guide psychologists in their professional practice including those individuals that face the challenges with the end of life.