To Whom It May Concern

I would like to offer a brief submission to the Victorian Parliament's End of Life Enquiry.

I am an Australian medical student in my final year of study. The following are several reasons why I do not support the legalisation of euthanasia.

• **Autonomy is not the supreme or only ethical principle that should guide end of life decisions**

  Our modern practice of medicine respects patient choice and upholds the ethical principle of autonomy through the legal institution of informed consent [1]. However, explored deeper, the concept of autonomy denotes self as priority, it is not a framework that easily explains self embedded in community or the notion of interpersonal responsibility.

  The argument could be made that if an individual has the right to make decisions about their own health care, that right extends to deciding when, where and how they will die. I would agree with Boudreau and Somerville’s argument [2] that where there is a right there is an obligation. A ‘right to die’ implies an obligation that others will fulfill that right if the person themselves are incapable of doing so. This raises questions about whose then is the responsibility to inflict death?

• **Suffering is an inadequate argument for legalising euthanasia**

  Suffering is one of the commonly presented reasons, and indeed an accepted definition, for euthanasia. However I would raise just a few of the many ethical questions that could be asked - How does one measure suffering? What kind of timeframe for intolerable suffering is required before euthanasia is acceptable? Is intolerable physical pain the only type of suffering? Interestingly in Oregon only a few of those who chose physician assisted suicide in the first four years it was legal cited pain as a factor [3].

• **To legalise euthanasia would erode the ethos and effectiveness of the medical profession**

  The medical profession is one that inherently has the privilege of trust and respect in society. Trust that the doctor is competent in their knowledge, that they will act within their scope of practice, that they will present and offer treatment choices based on the best available information, respect patient preferences and ultimately act in the best interest of the patient [4]. Trust is not only important to any individual doctor-patient relationship, but is something that doctors have an obligation to maintain for their profession [1,4].

  I suggest the legalization of euthanasia would change the way society viewed the medical profession. Values of integrity, dependence and compassion may be questioned when the doctor also has another role of killer. There is danger that the power imbalance in the doctor-patient relationship be exploited [5]. The profession would potentially attract those willing to commercialize and profit from assisted death [6]. It may also further complicate the responsibility a doctor has to act in the best interest of the patient and to use health resources effectively and responsibly [4].

• **A government has a responsibility to protect the vulnerable in society**

  Whether euthanasia is an ethically legitimate action is not the same debate, nor necessarily the same conclusion, as whether euthanasia should be legal. Laws are created and responsible for protecting the good of a society including its most vulnerable individuals. It is interesting to consider that in 1973 the Dutch court made an allowance that whilst euthanasia would remain illegal it would be permitted in those few cases where there were no other methods to relieve a
patient's agony. Euthanasia has since been legalized including not only for the terminally ill but also the chronically ill, the depressed who had no physical illness, infants with birth defects and elderly with dementia. According to the Remmelink Report [5], 1040 people died from involuntary euthanasia without request or consent. Of these, 145 people were fully competent to make their own medical decisions and another 72% had never given any indication they would like their lives terminated. Furthermore at least half of Dutch physicians were found to take the initiative by suggesting euthanasia to their patients [5,7].

Thank you for your consideration of these important issues.

Kind Regards
Jodie Trautman

References


