26 August 2015

Hon Edward O'Donohue MLC
Chair
Legal and Social Issues Committee
Victorian Legislative Council
Parliament House
MELBOURNE

Dear Mr O'Donohue

Please find enclosed the submission from the Little Sisters of the Poor to the Inquiry into End of Life Choices.

Yours sincerely

Sr Angela Burns
Superior

attachment
INTRODUCTION

We, the Little Sisters of the Poor feel compelled to make this submission to the Legal & Social Issues Committee Inquiry into End of Life Choices. This is a topic which is an integral part of our mission.

Following in the footsteps of our Mother Foundress, Jeanne Jugan, the care of the dying has always been the summit of our apostolate of providing a Home for the elderly poor. We value our tradition of providing a constant, prayerful presence to those who have entered the dying process and we invite our collaborators to participate in this most sacred aspect of our mission.

This submission aims to show how the concepts of palliative care are put into practice by the Little Sisters of the Poor throughout the world.

PALLIATIVE CARE

The World Health Organization defines palliative care as

- “…an approach that improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problem associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual. Palliative care:
  - Providing relief from pain and other distressing symptoms;
  - Affirming life and regards dying as a normal process;
  - Intending neither to hasten nor postpone death;
  - Integrating the psychological and spiritual aspects of patient care;
  - Offering a support system to help patients live as actively as possible until death;
  - Offering a support system to help the family cope during the patient’s illness and in their own bereavement;
  - Using a team approach to address the needs of patients and their families, including bereavement counselling, if indicated;
  - Enhancing quality of life, and may also positively influence the course of illness.

It has been said, in more simple terms, that palliative care is doing everything that can be done when no more can be done.

As Little Sisters we are committed to giving skilled quality care to the elderly. In today’s climate, with the threat of voluntary euthanasia, this is even more important. In our Homes where the person is accompanied, we rarely hear a request to end it all. One will sometimes hear: ‘I am afraid of dying in pain’. With skilled palliative care and modern drugs, pain can be controlled and comfort given.

In the Homes of the Little Sisters, each member of staff has a role to play and great collaboration is needed within the team of pastoral, clinical, diversional therapy, catering, cleaning, laundry staff, so as to ensure that together we work to provide the greatest comfort for the Resident and every help and comfort for their loved ones.
ACCOMPANIMENT

St. John Paul II once wrote, “... the temptation to give up in utter desperation, is above all a request for companionship, sympathy and support in the time of trial. It is a plea for help to keep on hoping when all human hopes fail” (E.V. no.67)

Accompanying the elderly by an attentive presence while procuring for them the palliative care their condition requires is one of the core values of the mission of the Little Sisters of the Poor. Even though our Foundress did not mention the term ‘palliative care’, she had its spirit and intuition. She used all the means available to her to bring comfort and pain relief and she surrounded the elderly with thoughtful attentions, visiting them and increasing contact with their families. Following in her footsteps, the Little Sisters have done this for more than 150 years.

We aim to journey with the elderly person from the time they enter our care until the time that they die.

The serenity of old age, in our experience, increases by having the security of being treated and cared for until death. Old age then becomes like a beautiful sunset, a life slowly ebbing towards eternity.

The well-known phrase of Dame Cicely Saunders –’You matter until the last moment of your life and we will do all that we can, not only to help you die peacefully, but to help you live until you die’.

PSYCHOSOCIAL AND SPIRITUAL NEEDS

In old age, unresolved life issues will sometimes surface. These may include sentiments of anger, regrets, frustration, lack of reconciliation in relationships, either with family or others. Our accompaniment consists in walking with that person, with a non-judgemental attitude and a readiness to listen, showing them, love and mercy.

As Little Sisters of the Poor we often witness the extraordinary things that happen at the bedside of our dying Residents – striking acts of faith, graces of personal conversion and family reconciliation and exceptional gestures of empathy on the part of our staff members.

We consider it a great privilege to keep constant vigil, day and night, near the Aged who are dying, so that they are never left alone.

AS DEATH APPROACHES

The room of the dying person becomes a sacred space. The door is open and staff and Residents are welcome to visit the dying person and encouraged to speak to them. There is great attention to detail, respecting the wishes and the tastes of the dying person. An Advance Care Plan has already been developed with the Resident and family members as part of the admission process, and this is respected.

There are flowers, family photos close by and religious symbols if desired. Families are welcome and made comfortable and supported. In this way, dying takes on its true dignity.
This atmosphere of peace and openness removes any fear that other Residents may have when they know that someone will always be with them and that they will be made comfortable.

**DANGERS OF VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA**

Voluntary Euthanasia could lead to:

- Lack of trust between carers and patients
- Pressure to yield to spoken or unspoken wishes of relatives
- Voluntary now - but what of the future?

**CONCLUSION**

We believe that ‘accompanying’ embraces all the concepts of palliative care so that we can say with conviction ‘don’t kill, accompany’.

St. John Paul II called this accompaniment “the way of love and true mercy.” This way of love, which our common humanity calls for, is the opposite of assisted suicide and euthanasia, which St. John Paul called a ‘disturbing perversion of mercy’. True compassion “leads to sharing another’s pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear.” Compassion, or “suffering with” another, manifests what is best in us as members of the human family.

Finally, in a society where the elderly may be seen as unproductive members, or a burden, Pope Benedict XVI had this to say:

“Dear elderly brothers and sisters... never feel down at heart: you are a wealth for society, even in suffering and sickness.

We would be very happy to welcome the members of the Legal and Social Issues Committee to visit our Home at Northcote at a mutually convenient time.