



Legislative Council - Standing Committee on Legal and Social Issues

2015 Inquiry into End of Life Choices

Submission from Catholic Social Services Victoria

Catholic Social Services Victoria is the representative body for the major Catholic providers in Victoria of social welfare services, disability services and aged care services. A list of our 50 member organisations is attached.

These organisations provide a broad array of services to people in need, including some of the most disadvantaged members of the Victorian community. They share the common conviction that those in our community who are the most vulnerable, at risk or lacking in access to those resources basic to ensuring human dignity, are most worthy of our special care and respect. This includes those experiencing vulnerability because of aging, illness or disability who, likewise, deserve special care and protection.

The positive choice made by a society to favour and protect the interests of its most vulnerable members, even when this imposes limits on the behaviour and freedom of others, has long been considered a fundamental test of what constitutes a civilised society.

The principle underlying this choice to protect and show special concern for the interests of the most vulnerable is the acceptance that all life is inherently endowed with dignity and worth. This is not diminished by any form of disability or loss of functional capacity due to the aging process. The vagaries and vulnerabilities that are part and parcel of human existence, especially as a result of the aging process, do not, in any circumstance, negate this inherent worth.

This principle consequently requires an unconditional respect and care for human life in all its stages.

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Catholic Social Services Victoria believes that the shift from the concept of the dignity and worth of all human life, to an emphasis on quality of life, by which is commonly meant a value judgement regarding those attributes and functions that are considered necessary to define a life worth living, introduces a dangerous paradigm.

Such a shift undermines society's long and firmly held belief in the inherent dignity of all persons. The privileging of a particular view of 'quality of life' makes assumptions about what constitutes dignity and worthwhileness which many, but especially many with a disability, find repugnant.

Functional loss, whether physical or intellectual, often the key reasons used in the argument for euthanasia, are realities many people with a disability constantly live with. Moreover, as practises overseas show, the definition of what constitutes quality of life, no matter how tightly legislated, is open to further debate and legislation and shifting interpretations.

Member organisations of Catholic Social Services Victoria that deal professionally and compassionately with people experiencing trauma or suicidal ideation, affirm that the decision to end one's life is often made because of depression and a sense of personal hopelessness, or because of the profound grief associated with loss of a loved one who may be a large part of their experience of living. Person-centred support and therapy, especially when provided by professionals working in partnership – social workers, medical practitioners, psychologists and so on - can lead to healing and a regaining of the desire to live as fully as possible.

A society that does its utmost to prevent suicide, knowing that the choice is usually made in the midst of great pain, deep grief or depression, would, logically, also oppose assisted suicide and euthanasia as an end of life choice which is usually made in similar circumstances.

Advances in palliative medicine have developed very effective treatments at the end of life, especially in the area of pain control. The extensive availability of palliative care for those with terminal illnesses also provides attention to the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of a person nearing the end of life, with the goal of ensuring that they experience holistic care and support.



When death is inevitable and imminent, there is no overriding obligation to prolong life by all available means. As Catholic Health Australia has expressed this:

Since good medicine treats a person rather than a condition, respect for persons requires that they neither be under-treated nor over-treated; rather, when people are dying they should have access to the care that is appropriate to their condition.¹

Thus, the withdrawal or refusal of overly burdensome treatment is not euthanasia, a point which is often misunderstood. For this reason there needs to be greater effort made in the area of public education about the realities of palliative care and end of life issues in general. An important feature of such education should be a refocusing on the responsibility of society to protect and honour all life but especially to care for and ensure the dignity of the most vulnerable in our community, including the aged, the seriously ill and the disabled.

Catholic Social Services Victoria therefore recommends that:

- The Victorian Legislature reaffirm the principle of the inherent dignity and worth of every human life regardless of age or infirmity and thus rejects the introduction of assisted suicide and euthanasia as an appropriate response to end of life issues.
- The education of all health professionals about palliative care and end of life care should be a mandatory component of their training.
- There should be public education regarding palliative care as person-centred care where choice and control of the dying person are supported.
- The Victorian Government should provide additional funding for improvements in palliative care, including greater availability and access to quality palliative care.

Attachment: Members of Catholic Social Services Victoria

¹ Catholic Health Australia 2001 *Code of Ethical Standards for Catholic Health and Aged Care Services in Australia*, Catholic Health Australia, Canberra, p 42



Catholic Social Services Victoria - Members

Aboriginal Catholic Ministry	Marist Youth Centre
Assisi Centre	Mary Aikenhead Ministries
Australian Catholics Against Trafficking of Humans	Mary MacKillop Aged Care
Brigidine Asylum Seeker Project	McAuley Community Services for Women
Catholic Chaplains' Association for Health Care	Missionary Sisters of Service
CatholicCare Melbourne	Office for Justice & Peace, Archdiocese of Melbourne
CatholicCare Victoria Tasmania	Order of Malta Hospice Home Care
CatholicCare Sandhurst	Nazareth House - Sisters of Nazareth
Catholic Women's League Victoria and Wagga Wagga	Pregnancy Assistance, Frankston
Centacare, Diocese of Ballarat	Rosies Oblate Youth Mission
Corazon	Sacred Heart Mission, St Kilda
Corpus Christi Community	Shekinah Homeless Services
Don Bosco Youth Centre & Hostel	Sisters of Charity Community Care
Edmund Rice Camps	Society of St Vincent de Paul
Edmund Rice Refugee and Community Services	Solo Catholics
Good Samaritan Inn	Southern Cross Care (Vic)
Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand	St John of God ACCORD
Griefline	St Joseph's Flexible Learning Centre
Jesuit Social Services	St Joseph's Home for the Aged, Little Sisters of the Poor
John Pierce Centre for Deaf Ministry	St Mary's House of Welcome
Kewn Kreestha	The Way Community
Keysborough Learning Centre	Vietnamese Catholic Family Mutual Assistance Network
Larmenier Child and Family Centre	Villa Maria Catholic Homes
MacKillop Family Services	VincentCare Victoria
Marillac	Wellsprings for Women