

Canberra Times opinion piece on Euthanasia

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Everyone wants a good death. We all wish that every person, particularly our family and friends, will be free of distress and pain when they die.

That doesn't always happen, but that is a reason to demand better, more equitable and more accessible care, not the legalisation of lethal drugs.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide go to the very heart of who we are as a society and how we regard people in our community. Do all people have equal human dignity and value, or are some lives, because of illness or disability, no longer worthy of our continued love, compassion, care and protection?

For the past 18 months, our community has worked to protect each and every person from COVID-19. The overwhelming majority of people have rejected the utilitarian view that vulnerable people, because of age or disability, are not worth protecting at the expense of some of our freedoms.

Yet here we are, with some making the case that terminally ill people should be allowed to end their lives with lethal drugs. And not only that, doctors will be enlisted to approve that decision to end a life intentionally.

Laws that would allow a third person to end or assist in ending a human being's life are among the most serious considered by parliaments. That's why it is appropriate for the federal parliament to have oversight over territories.

Commonwealth powers have not been used lightly but are appropriate when small jurisdictions with unicameral parliaments are deciding to allow something as serious as state-sanctioned deaths, particularly when that decision may threaten the wellbeing of vulnerable people and people in neighbouring states.

Pain and autonomy dominate discussions of euthanasia, but international evidence shows that fear, depression, loneliness, not wanting to be burden, even pressure by family members, can all be factors in someone asking for euthanasia or assisted suicide.

The compassionate response addresses those problems to help people make the most of their remaining days rather than cut their lives short. Palliative care offers pain relief but also symptom management by addressing a terminally ill person's social, emotional and spiritual needs.

From inquiries on elder abuse, we know that people very sadly do not always have the best interests of aged relatives in mind. The Australian Law Reform Commission found that risk factors for elder abuse include disability, poor physical or mental health, including depression, low socioeconomic status and social isolation.

The Aged Care Royal Commission found "abuse pervades the Australian aged care system".

Indigenous Australians have also voiced their concerns, with Senator Pat Dodson saying First Nations people "would be very wary of preventive medicine, very wary of presenting to places when they are sick if people know this is a clinic that has assisted someone in dying".

Local and international experience tells us that the reasons for euthanasia quickly expand once legalised, as do the numbers of people taking a lethal dose.

Victoria's laws came into effect in June 2019. The Premier estimated there would be a dozen deaths by assisted suicide in the first year of operation. Instead, 124 people died in the first year, more than ten times the original estimate.

In Canada – a country not unlike our own – assisted suicide was legalised just five years ago. A scheme initially limited to people with a terminal illness now includes people with psychiatric conditions. Annual deaths by assisted suicide increased by more than a third between 2019 and 2020 to more than 7500 people per year, with one in five people who died by lethal drugs citing isolation and loneliness as a reason.

Euthanasia eligibility in the Netherlands has expanded from terminal illness to include people with mental health conditions and those with dementia who had previously consented. Euthanasia has moved from accounting for less than 2 per cent of all deaths in 2002 to more than 4 per cent in 2019.

It is clear that if the ACT Legislative Assembly were allowed to legislate on euthanasia and assisted suicide, the Labor/Greens Government would quickly work to change the law.

The Catholic Church would oppose that move, based on our long tradition of caring with great compassion for people who are ill or dying and for their families. We believe that every human person is made in the image of God and so they have dignity, and their life is precious. People's attitude to the value of all people threatened by COVID-19 shows our view on this issue is widely shared.

Shouldn't our political leaders be prioritising better care rather than legalising lethal drugs? Our community should be working harder to attend better to the often complex physical, social, spiritual and psychological needs of our most vulnerable neighbours as they approach death, rather than promoting abandonment and suicide.