



Voluntary Assisted Dying

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The Church participates in the debate on the question of Voluntary Assisted Dying as an organisation that is committed to human dignity. However, the church should speak respectfully in this debate, conscious that it speaks in the midst of a largely secular society that does not share its values or perspective.

The sanctity of human life is universally recognised as fundamental and the right to life is seen as a basic human right in domestic and international Human Rights legislation, placing an acknowledged obligation on governments and their agents to respect, protect and promote it. This human right is based on the essential belief that every human being is of intrinsic value.

Christians believe that humans are made 'in the image of God' (Genesis 1:27) and as such the life of every human person is of immense value. For Christians, life is sacred because it is a gift from God. As a report from the Church of England states, *for a Christian, this principle also encapsulates the simple belief that God owns my life, not I, and I have, therefore, no right to end it.*¹

Despite this, in many circumstances life is ended prematurely, such as when treatment is declined or when excessive medical treatment and interventions are terminated. All of these are consistent with the Christian faith in enabling a person to die with dignity.

Sadly, there are still extreme instances of painful or distressing illness where the person does not wish their life to continue. Whether or not provision can be made for Voluntary Assisted Dying in NSW as a compassionate response under strict conditions in a small number of cases remains to be seen. Yet while the wishes and needs of individuals are important, they cannot be viewed in isolation from the effects that they might have on other individuals and on society in general. As McCarthy states, when viewing legislative change an important consideration is whether any changes made are likely to result in a more, or less, caring and cohesive society: in other words, what sort of community are we building?²

The Church does not oppose enabling people to die well. This goal is shared by health care professionals, especially those working in palliative care and hospices, and by hospital chaplains. Holistic palliative care, which treats every individual with respect and dignity is a viable, life-affirming alternative to assisted dying.

While much could be said on the legal and ethical implications of the Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation currently before the NSW Parliament, my focus in writing is pastoral. Churches and church agencies care every day for the elderly, the ill, the dying and their families; our concern is rooted in a profoundly human and sacred calling to care for the most vulnerable in our society, a concern shared by people of all faiths and of none. I am deeply conscious that for many, a change in the law would result, not in greater comfort, but in an added burden to consider ending their lives prematurely.

I keep the Members of the NSW Parliament in my prayers as they debate this important matter and eventually participate in a conscience vote.

Ends

Notes.

1. Assisted Suicide and Voluntary Euthanasia: A Briefing Paper from the Mission and Public Affairs Council, June 2004, p.4.
2. Brendan McCarthy, Why the Church of England Supports the Current Law on Assisted Suicide, 2017, p.3.