



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

SELECT COMMITTEE ON END OF LIFE CHOICES IN THE ACT

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Submission Cover Sheet

End of Life Choices in the ACT

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UKRAINIAN AUTOCEPHALIC
ORTHODOX CHURCH
IN AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND

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The Secretary,
Select Committee on End of Life Choices in the ACT
Legislative Assembly for the ACT
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Submission Statement for End of Life Choices

The moment a person is born they begin the journey toward bodily death. In the greater context of the interconnectedness of our lives with God and our fellow human beings, freedom to die painlessly and peacefully is a universally held hope that is prayed for both openly and secretly in a wide variety of ways, both consciously and unconsciously by all persons. The God given gift of life is something that many take for granted. What cannot be overstated is, it is God who has appointed our entry and exit into this world and it is not up to man to take the place of God in choosing who can and cannot live or end someone's life.

It is argued by many that the evolutionary process has resulted in mankind being at the current physical and psychological stage of the evolutionary process today. To the limited human mind it is extremely difficult to understand the process of dying, including the processes of pain and suffering. However, all persons ultimately understand that one day they are going to die, not knowing when, where or how. Rational human beings do not want to see someone suffer through physical or psychological pain. However, human suffering is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon that, like many aspects of human life, is a long way from being fully understood. Pain caused by a variety of physical means is an important but not sole cause of suffering. A complex network of nerves send signals to the brain, which can become more or less sensitive to pain in response to the guidance of our brain. Physical pain is believed to be a type of motivator for behaviour and at the same time it is shaped by our emotions and thoughts. It is also believed that disturbances of the brain, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder, are factual sources of suffering. These and other psychiatric conditions are connected to changes in brain chemistry, hormone balance, and physical genetic expression as are deficits in social support and family life. It is believed that pain as a result of social exclusion is expressed through the same brain circuits that mediate physical pain. Understanding the unity of emotional and physical suffering may help all those involved in trying to ameliorate suffering.

Those of us who have had a parent, relative or friend who suffered from a terminal illness know that to care for a person during the last few weeks and days of life can be demanding and stressful. A variety of feelings and emotions can and often do surface during this time. Carers and relatives are often concerned that death will be a painful experience for their

loved one. However, **the time before death is generally peaceful.** As the body begins to 'let go' of life, there is a gentle winding down that may take several days. If there is any restlessness, it can be treated, as there have been many advances in palliative care. Yes, every person is different and the well documented physiological signs prior to death will not be the same with every person, nor will they occur in any particular sequence. Sometimes these signs appear a few hours before death, sometimes even a few days beforehand. These physical signs are part of the normal, natural process of the person's body gradually slowing down.

My father died of pancreatic cancer, my brother died of brain cancer and my brother-in-law died from throat cancer. All were treated with pain relieving drugs and were made quite comfortable in the advanced stages of their illnesses prior to their soul's departure from this earthly life. I have also visited many elderly parishioners in the advanced stage of illness and also in the final hours of their lives. All were kept pain free with excellent palliative care provided by the hospices that cared for them.

There are well documented psychological stages that accompany the physiological stages of succumbing to a terminal illness. One of these stages is termed the 'bargaining' stage. This is where people most often turn to God to grant them more time on this earth. Nonetheless they turn to God their Creator. From an Orthodox Christian perspective, it is God's will that all turn to Him in a spirit of repentance in their 'hour of need.' Sometimes people only turn to God in the depth of suffering, such as even the thief who turned to God in his dying breaths on the cross, and the pain experienced at crucifixion in the Roman Empire is believed to have been excruciating. Whether we look at pain and suffering from either a biological or psychological viewpoint within the evolutionary process, one thing is clear, pain and suffering appears to be an inseparable part of life. From an Orthodox Christian theological point of view, this is clearly the result and consequence of the 'Fall' of mankind.

Among the stories of many people who have experienced losing a loved one and who understandably grieve their loss, there are so many who speak of the emotional and physical bond of love that develops between family members in caring for a loved one going through the various stages of pain and suffering as they progress toward the final stage of dying. It is believed to be akin to the bond that develops between a mother and her newborn baby, who similarly is helpless and is totally dependent on parental love and care for their survival.

It should also be remembered that remission of symptoms can occur at any stage of a terminal illness. There are many reported cases of comatose patients given no chance of pulling through and yet people have awakened after even years in an unconsciousness state. There are also regularly reported cases in the media of misdiagnosis in many varied medical cases including those who are diagnosed with a terminal illness. There can also be severe reaction to drugs, incorrect dosage of a drug among other factors that do not deliver the 'desired' outcome, a 'backfiring' or 'hiccup' in the process for which the consequences could be extremely severe and damaging for the patient and for any other person who would be present in that situation, especially family members or loved ones. Then there is the possibility of the nightmare scenario of euthanasia drugs falling into the wrong hands.

We should also remind ourselves of the well-known characters in history who have applied God like powers to themselves in selecting who lives and who dies, such as Hitler and Stalin to name just two. History shows they are just men who came into political power, yet the

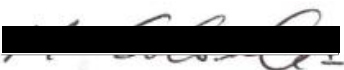
power they possessed affected the lives of countless millions. Medical practitioners such as Dr Joseph Mengele were ruthless in their cold RSPCA attitude toward other human beings regardless of their medical condition. Governments could save billions in identifying and selecting those whom are deemed to be suffering too much, especially selecting those who have been abandoned by families and others. Legislating to end someone's suffering is starting to resemble this abovementioned cold and clinical mentality. The Law is cold in its application and once enacted, cannot alleviate the various levels of psychological affects resulting from resulting guilt or the realization of a horribly incorrect decision. Physical death of the body is permanent! Psychological torment can last a lifetime and can have drastically wide ranging and damaging effects. **Effects that produce psychological pain and suffering.**

Medical practitioners so often do not see the full picture in a suffering person's or their family's life journey. It is not pleasant to see people dying. It is rarely a boisterous and jovial time. Quite understandably, it must be difficult for some medical practitioners who deal with dying patients and only see that sad end of person's life not the whole picture. I can envisage someone in this position continually or frequently would look to a means of 'ending the suffering' as a practical means of dealing with the situation. However, once a person is dead and buried or discarded by cremation, you cannot communicate with them in the way that you can with a person who is physically present regardless of their state of health. There is a healing in this last stage that can bring enormous benefit to the dying person by simply sitting with them, holding their hand and speaking in a calm, loving and reassuring manner. Even when the person does not respond, they can most likely hear you and I am sure that they can sense your love for them. We can never underestimate the value of these simple things. 'Being with' can be more important than 'doing for.'

Expressing love and forgiveness in this 'final hour' and communicating to them that you are peacefully 'letting them go' in the time appointed to them from above, leaves loving memories in the hearts and minds of all who help their loved ones persevere through to the end of their natural life. There are many like myself, who are grateful to have experienced this deep sense of love and connection that will be with me until my dying breath.

Please do not legislate assisted dying or euthanasia in the A.C.T.

Yours sincerely,



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