



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

Submission Number: 462

Date Authorised for Publication: 19/4/18

23 March 2018

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DeW Secretary

I am pleased to provide this submission to the Select Committee on End of Life Choices in the ACT for its current inquiry. I make this submission in a personal capacity as an ACT resident.

This submission specifically seeks to address items 1(b), 1(c), 1(d) and 1(e) of the inquiry's terms of reference.

While I recognise the hurt and heartache that can come from having a family member or close friend diagnosed with a terminal illness and a desire from some, from a place of compassion, to permit options to legally end their lives early, I contend that legally permitting suicide through euthanasia would have widespread consequences and set a dangerous precedent. But above all, I believe that such a move would see the state devalue the worthiness of human life.

Such a change in law, which would see the ACT be one of the very few and few jurisdictions in the world, to permit such a reform would be highly undesirable.

The fact that the likes of the Hon. John Howard AC and the Hon. Paul Keating AC are of a similar mind on this radical social change in itself demonstrates and highlights that opposition to such a proposal is not limited to a particular sect of the Australian populous.

I cannot agree more with former Prime Minister Keating's assessment that the government should focus on "the optimism of live, not the pessimism of suicide".

My principal concern about assisted suicide is the cultural change that would come from the state sanctioning and supporting suicide. Regrettably in Australia today,

suicide is one of the leading causes of death for young Australians – many of whom are suffering from deep forms of depression where they can see no other way out.

Rightly, Australian Governments and mental health organisations have made a significant investment in sending a clear message to all young Australians that suicide is never the solution and should not be contemplated. I am seriously concerned that should such a change in law be progressed, it would undermine and undo much of this good and important work. Any message from the state that there are circumstances where suicide is a valid or reasonable option could have catastrophic circumstances particularly for many young people.

The limited international experience demonstrates that this is a clear consequence of law change in this regard. For example, in Oregon the suicide rate is 42% higher than the national average and has been on the steady incline since the year 2000.

Further, the risk is far too great of an individual who is incorrectly diagnosed who decides to take their own life. If even one person were to take their own life in circumstances where they could have gone on to live a long and productive life, that is one too many and worse still, the permanency of taking one's own life means we can never know.

In relation to the recent assisted suicide legislation passed in Victoria, I was somewhat perturbed by the fact that the champions of the reform who claim to be pushing it out of 'compassion' while at the same time offering no protection or safety net for those falsely diagnosed, for the depressed or for the vulnerable.

Turning to the medical community, such legislation would place medical professionals in a near impossible position and force them to break the Hippocratic Oath. It would effectively create two classes of patient care, the first those whose lives we honour and support and the second, those whom we deem unworthy of living. This is a threshold that once crossed, is impossible to go back.

It is noted that surveys from the membership of the Australian Medical Association have found that doctors who regularly deliver end-of-life care to patients are among those that have the greatest opposition to assisted suicide.

In relation to the ACT's law-making powers in this space, I support a continuation of the current governance arrangements. While the ACT has been granted self-government, it is the gift of the Commonwealth and it must be noted that the ACT does not have an upper house nor is the Assembly of a size or robustness to deal with such matters. The fact that the ACT Government's agenda often resembles something out of a political correctness experiment over delivering good government would not inspire much confidence in the ACT being able to make decisions of such moment.

I contend that the Federal Parliament is well within its right to curtail the ACT's law-making powers as it sees fit in those circumstances and on matters of life and death, such as this, it is in fact highly appropriate.

While the Committee will undoubtedly receive many emotive submissions from individuals or their families that have found themselves in difficult circumstances, I respectfully contend that the laws of the ACT should be implemented for the best interests of Canberrans and not governed by emotion.

On that basis, any rational assessment would conclude that the risks of law change are far too great.

For the state to say in law that there are some people whose lives we value and support and others that we believe are better off dead is a horrific and disturbing notion. Normalising any form of suicide changes our view of death and presents an accepted alternative to physical and possibly even mental pain.

I urge the Committee reject any push for assisted suicide legislation in the ACT.

I thank the Committee for the opportunity to make this submission.

Yours sincerely



JOSH MANUATU