

## **Dying With Dignity Submission**

I am writing in support of Voluntary Assisted Dying. I attended the Australian Nursing Federation conference in Adelaide in 2016 where I listened to journalist and TV presenter, Andrew Denton present his passionate presentation about this very important issue. I also attended the public hearing on 16th July 2019 in Bundaberg in support of this VAD. I am a Registered Nurse/Midwife and currently work as a Flight Nurse for the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Queensland Section.

I have been a nurse for 42 years and have seen many people suffer with various terminal illnesses and in some cases horrific deaths due to the lack of support and legislation to assist those patients to end their pain and suffering.

My first job was working at a private nursing home in Western Australia at the age of 15 years old while still at school and having employment after school, on weekends and public holidays. I worked there until I completed my year 12 exams and then full-time until I got into my nursing training. The first couple of years I worked in the kitchen and laundry, serving meals to the residents and doing the dishes. At the age of 17 years old, I worked as a Nursing Assistant, learning on the job, as there was no professional training at that time. During this time at the nursing home I witnessed my first death of a lovely elderly man who died of old age. Sadly at the other end of the spectrum, I looked after a young man in his mid-30's who had Huntington's Chorea. This mans' condition progressively got worse to the point that he was unable to feed, dress, bathe himself or walk and he died at the age of 40 years from this debilitating and effectively terminal condition. There has been many discussions about young people in nursing homes over the past few years but there wasn't back then in the 70's. Had VAD been around then this resident would have been able to make an informed choice when it was time for him to die. Instead he had to endure years of indignity and poor quality of life.

Over the years as a professional Registered Nurse and Midwife I have supported patients who have endured such suffering only to have no choice and they were going to die, no positive prognosis. I recall two (2) young men both in their late 20's and 30's who had worked on Christmas Island and had developed oesophageal varices due to excessive alcohol abuse. Both of these men were patients on my medical and surgical wards and both did not have relatives or spouses to support them. Both men were end-stage sufferers and I supported both of these men in their dying days pumping precious blood packs into them and they regularly vomited blood and were faecally incontinent of the blood which was being given to them. There was no medication to stop this bleeding in the 80's and early 90's and any surgical intervention was hopeless. Both these men bled to death while being aware of what was happening to them. How terrifying this would have been for them and the pain they had to endure. There was no VAD choice for them either. It was so challenging for me also watching these men suffer, continuing to give 8-12 units of precious blood which was running out of them as quickly as it was being administered.

In 1988 I worked on an Oncology ward where a young woman of a similar age to myself, 30 years old was terminally ill with breast cancer. She had a husband and two (2) young children, 4 and 6 years of age who would visit her every evening. She would was terrified about dying and leaving her young family. She would spend her nights

screaming through the ward in fear and the inevitable loss of her family. It was so distressing for the staff, the patients and no doubt soul-destroying for her husband and children. I often think of her and her children and how they lived their lives following the death of their mother and wife. Had VAD been an option she would have not endured weeks of pain and emotional suffering as she had until her death . Her last days could have been more peaceful and her pain managed better without fear that each injection could have caused her death.

My personal experience was seeing my father die at the age of 62 years old from Pancreatic Cancer, having been treated for Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma 3 years earlier. My father had been a fit, well and active businessman prior to this. He died at home, but not without its challenges of managing his basic needs of showering and toileting when he was unable to walk to the bathroom, as well as managing his pain until he died. He had a terminal disease, therefore was never going to recover, so to have avoided excruciating pain, losing his independence and dignity he would have chosen VAD if it had been available.

We all deserve to choose how we wish to die, having a choice how we end our lives, with dignity and respect in the same way we have lived our lives. None of us should fear having a painful death when we can choose a peaceful and less painful one.

The families, carers and support staff who look after these patients are also traumatised by the suffering their loved ones and patients have to currently endure so please let us try the alternative.

Like all new challenges there is anxiety and fear but the option has to be better than what we currently endure. Please let us have a choice. Maybe it is not for everyone but at least for those who choose Dying with Dignity- Voluntary Assisted Dying we have an alternative.

### **I support the Draft VAD Bill as it is.**

Doctors must use electronic systems to communicate with other health professionals and their patients, particularly those living in rural and remote communities who request VAD.

People living in their own homes who wish to die at home must be able to have access to VAD.

Yours sincerely,

Gillian Humbert - RN, RM, MPH&TM

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