

Jenny Warren

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30 June, 2021

hec@parliament.qld.gov.au

RE: The draft Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021

Dear Members of the Health Committee

I am a Registered Nurse (who has worked in palliative care and seen many a bad death) and I am writing to express my support for the draft Queensland Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021, currently before the Health and Environment Committee.

You have probably noticed that I am writing to you from South Australia. I should start by explaining why a non-resident would feel so strongly as to be writing to you about this bill.

I may live in South Australia but my heart is firmly in Queensland. I spent most of my life in Queensland and, even though I now live interstate, I still have a house in Bundaberg and we have many Queensland friends and family.

More importantly, all of my children are Queensland-born and I have two step-kids and six grandkids who also live in QLD – so as you can see I have many roots there and an interest in seeing my home state pass the same compassionate law as Victoria, Western Australia, Tasmania and, most recently, South Australia have passed.

Flexible residency requirements

I want to voice my support for all aspects of the draft bill, but in particular the provision that would allow non-residents with close ties to Queensland to apply to be considered for VAD. My reasons are two-fold. First, I would love to have the option of returning to Queensland myself if I am ever facing the end of my life and need to be with family or friends. To me this is just common sense and would give me enormous peace of mind if I were ever in that situation. Second, I have seen first-hand the relief and peace of mind this option gives someone diagnosed with a terminal illness. My 35-year-old daughter, Ceara Rickard, has been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. Ceara is living and working (as a psychologist) in Tasmania with her husband. She played a central role in the Tasmanian campaign to pass a VAD law. She was so happy when the Tasmanian parliament passed the law earlier this year, but she was also anxious, knowing that, as her cancer progressed, she would want the option of returning to South Australia to die here surrounded by her immediate family. At that time, South Australia had not passed a VAD law, and she was

faced with an impossible choice – leave Tasmania, where VAD was legal, only to be denied that option in South Australia and potentially die in a way she did not want. Determined that she should not have to make that choice, Ceara also campaigned vocally for the South Australian law to pass, which thankfully it did just a few weeks ago.

When the SA law passed, Ceara told me she was incredibly relieved. Since the Tasmanian campaign, her cancer has progressed and she knows the clock is ticking for her. She said. "Mum, I can now move home with a feeling of freedom knowing I have a choice. If it hadn't been passed this time, I don't think I would have had the time to wait for the next time it would come before parliament."

As you can imagine, it means everything to me that she can now come home. In fact, I plan to fly down to Tassie at the end of July to help Ceara and her husband pack and bring them back. Whether she will access VAD is another thing -- she may not. She certainly does not have a death wish, but she is very pro-choice, as am I. Either way, helping my daughter to die when the time comes will be the hardest thing I've ever done. To allow a person to have the choice at the very end, as to how they die, is a beautiful and a very freeing thing for them. It's a gift—no, it's a right. And people should have that right.

I fervently hope other families, who have loved ones scattered across the country, will have the same opportunity and choice in Queensland.

12-month timeframe to death

More generally, I would also like to express my support for the draft QLD bill's provision of a 12-month timeframe to death. I fully support giving people with a terminal diagnosis the time they need to put in train what can be a time-consuming, complicated and stressful process. My understanding of the Victorian experience is that many people start the VAD process too late and, as a consequence, face terrible barriers and hurdles to accessing the law. It would be a difficult thing to navigate at the best of times, let alone when you are desperately unwell. To my mind, 12 months would give dying Queenslanders the time and space to access this end-of-life choice without adding to their pain and suffering. Through my work I have seen many people with terminal illnesses. They do not want to die, they want to go on living for as long as they can. Giving them extra time to navigate the VAD process would not result in them rushing to take the medication prematurely – in fact just knowing they have it there as an option – that reassurance – may help keep more people alive for longer.

Access to Telehealth

I also want to emphasise how important it will be for Queenslanders to have access to Telehealth for their VAD assessments. As a registered nurse working in a small regional hospital here in South Australia, I understand more than most how difficult it can be for regional patients to access health care – the extra hurdles they have to clear – and the benefits that come from having access to Telehealth. I urge the Queensland government to continue to pressure the Commonwealth to amend their Criminal Code so dying Queenslanders in rural, regional and remote communities have the same access to VAD, via

Telehealth, as their city counterparts. This is a fairness and equity issue. It must be non-negotiable.

Institutional Conscientious Objection

I watched with interest the debate about institutional conscientious objection play out in the South Australian parliament. I fully support the SA amendments that curbed the extent of an institution's right to refuse access to what would be a legal medical choice. There may be an argument for hospitals to be exempt from allowing VAD on their premises (I am yet to be convinced, however, that institutions can have a conscience) but there is no doubt in my mind that no aged care facility and retirement village should have the right to deny terminally ill people access to legal VAD *in their own homes*. In Australia, we may have a right to religious freedom, but we also have a right to be free *from* religion. No-one should have to suffer for someone else's beliefs. Please stand firm on this issue.

Palliative support

Finally, I would like to say that experiencing death and dying issues at such close quarters, in both a professional and personal context, has made me a fierce advocate for better end-of-life conversations.

I vigorously support palliative care as well as voluntary assisted dying laws. It is not an either/ or debate. Both offer a dignified and peaceful option for patients with a terminal illness, at the end of life.

In the palliative care ward, I often hear from patients 'Please can you help me, so I can just go peacefully?' ... when patients and loved ones beg for 'just a little more' pain relief... Unfortunately, as it stands, I am legally hamstrung. I can't help them any more than the law allows me to. Thankfully soon, here in South Australia, they will have another option.

As for my daughter, despite her terminal prognosis, Ceara is living life with joyfulness, even recording a podcast to try to help others, from her perspective as a psychologist.

Sometimes, I gently share that podcast with my palliative patients. Ceara talks about the uncertainty of living while knowing you don't have control, and embracing life in all its fullness. My patients have found it has been of great comfort to them, even to nurse colleagues who have then shared it far and wide to others. I believe legal VAD will also lead to better end-of-life conversations and greater comfort for more people.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I wish the Queensland parliament the best of luck in passing this excellent bill.

Please feel free to contact me for more information, should you require it.

Yours sincerely,

Jenny Warren