




Speech By
Aaron Harper

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

Record of Proceedings, 14 September 2021

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Mr HARPER** (Thuringowa—ALP) (3.08 pm): I rise to support the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. I will be on the right side of history on this bill. I want to start by thanking the Premier, the Deputy Premier and the health minister for taking Queensland with them on this well-considered three-year journey. How difficult it is to reflect on three years of work in just 10 minutes, but I will start by thanking every single person who wrote to us and who came before us—45 public hearings in total, 11,000 submissions in total, hundreds of people sharing their deeply personal stories, like Peter in Rockhampton with motor neurone disease or John Ancliffe, who was here yesterday, or Kelly in Gladstone who spoke about her husband Matt or Marj Lawrence in Townsville talking about her husband.

By passing this bill, we will finally give those suffering a terminal illness in Queensland the choice to go out on their own terms with dignity, to end the misery and the awful, intolerable, needless suffering. I hope that by passing this bill we give comfort to those who are diagnosed with a terminal illness and their families that they have the right and the choice to die with dignity. Death is inevitable. We will all face it. No-one wants to die. As our dear friend Duncan told us, people fight every day to live. When the pain and suffering is too much we need to provide choice.

It is timely to recall our dear friend Duncan, the former member for Stretton, who stood bravely in this very parliament and said we needed to listen to those suffering a terminal illness. After three years of extensive work on this issue I can say that we have listened, Duncan. Those shared experiences we read, the pictures and photos we saw, the people who came before us—some suffering a terminal illness—were incredibly difficult to hear, but we heard all of them and many were simply heartbreaking. Loved ones shared stories of their family members or friends begging to end it all. Some had stopped eating or drinking to try to bring their death forward but, as we heard, many suffered for days and weeks begging staff and loved ones to end their suffering. I hope this extensive work leads to the bill being passed.

We heard of people taking their own lives in dreadful ways. We heard from Amy Gomes, a paramedic, about a lady who jumped off the roof of a residential aged-care facility. We heard from palliative care nurse and former paramedic Phil Browne who broke down recounting the cases he had attended, one where a gun was lying beside the body of a person who he had gone to. Diagnosed with a terminal illness, he blew his own head off. Imagine the family finding these people and the traumatic memories of the scene remaining with them forever. I recall reading a submission from a police officer in Townsville about an almost identical case he attended in Thuringowa some 20 years ago. Clearly that image is with him to this day. I do not want to talk about the cases I have attended. It is difficult because you have to read the note. It is just too traumatic.

In the last three years our current health committee has had the carriage of the bill and it has been a challenge emotionally. Some have said it must have been a heavy burden listening to it, but it is nothing like the burden of those who are facing death through a terminal diagnosis. The one thing I can reflect on is that everyone we spoke to could relate. They knew of someone who had suffered at

end of life. I have seen many people at end of life in my own career, not just patients or work colleagues but family. In the last three years I have lost my older brother to bladder cancer and my sister-in-law to brain cancer. I remember my younger brother saying, 'I don't want to watch her suffer.' We need to provide choice. We need to be compassionate. This is hard.

There are many people who joined us on this journey and I want to acknowledge them: from Dying with Dignity Queensland, Jos Hall, Jeanette Wiley, Craig Glasby; Clem Jones Trust, David Muir, Lindsay Marshall; Uniting Church Elder, Everal Compton—what a character; Doctors for Assisted Dying Choice, Sid Finnigan; Nurses for Assisted Dying; VALE; QNMU, every nurse who wrote and came before us—my dear friend Joan Pease has been a rock, as was the member for Pumicestone and all the members of the committee; we all shared this and it was tough—United Workers Union, Bob Hartley, and every paramedic who came before us, thank you; Go Gentle Australia, Andrew Denton, Frankie and Kiki, thank you; ETU, Stuey Traill, the late Peter Simpson and Penny Tovey; two very special constituents Marj Lawrence and Joan Musimeci who are watching this now—I know you are in Townsville—and Dr Will Cairns who came down from Townsville just recently; QUT professors Ben White and Lindy Willmott, you are amazing; former Speaker, Peter Wellington, who had a private conversation with me back in 2015; members of the health committee, thank you—all of you. To our secretariat, one who is battling cancer right now, thank you. We are thinking of you, Jacqui.

I used the hours flying back and forth to Townsville to read every single one of the submissions. People thought I must have been a bloody wreck because tears would flow from my eyes reading the stories and looking at the pictures of emaciated loved ones suffering at end of life. I have often said shared real life experiences are incredibly powerful. It is now Queensland's time to allow people to die with dignity.

To those who oppose this bill, please do not hide behind the rhetoric of palliative care. It has been addressed. Show compassion, show empathy, show understanding and listen to people. In the last three years in Thuringowa I have contacted over 2,000 people. I have phoned them, I have run surveys and polls—and I thank every single one of them—and 98 per cent of them want to provide people with a choice when they are faced with a terminal illness. We have gone right around the state. It did not matter whether we were in Mount Isa or Longreach, up in Mossman or Cairns or down here, everyone said the same thing: just give us choice. We are elected to listen to the people who voted for us. Members have a conscience vote and should listen to their electorates. I know we will have our personal views and I respect that, but let us also think of the people who we are representing in this state on this day. Let us be on the right side of history. Let us provide people a compassionate, dignified death, end the needless suffering and just show real compassion.

Dr Will Cairns said he had been delivering palliative care in Townsville for 40 years and seen thousands of people die. He is a palliative care specialist who said not all pain and suffering can be relieved with the most modern, specialised palliative care. He talked graphically about horrible cancers—head, neck and pelvic cancers—where people just wanted to die. He believes in giving people choice. I thank Dr Will Cairns for bravely coming before the committee, not once but twice, and informing MPs of why it is so important to provide people with choice at end of life. Hats off to everyone who is involved in palliative care. I have seen my own family provided with love and support, but when it does not go far enough that is our time to step in. We have an opportunity here to act with compassion. I urge every MP to read the reports and understand what people are saying in their electorates. To the deputy chair, thank you for your very personal contribution. I want to end my contribution by saying that this should be above politics and it should certainly be above religion. This is about people. Let us give people the choice. Let us let them make the decision on voluntary assisted dying.