




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR HERVEY BAY

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VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Mr TANTARI** (Hervey Bay—ALP) (7.49 pm): I rise to add my contribution to the debate on the bill before the House, the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. This bill before us is about establishing a voluntary assisted dying scheme in Queensland. Voluntary assisted dying refers to the administration of a voluntary assisted dying substance for the purpose of bringing about a person's death.

This bill is, without doubt, one of the single most significant and profound pieces of legislation that this House will probably ever debate. I do not say that lightly. This legislation requires members in this place to reach deep into their consciences, into their values and into their humanity to find the answer to their decision and vote on it. It is what makes this debate one of the hardest we may face here in this place. It is with this in mind that I stand here, understanding the enormity of what this House is considering with this bill. How do I as an individual come to the decision I must provide in representing the people of the Hervey Bay electorate? How have I come to that decision?

I said to the people of Hervey Bay that when the time came for me to make a decision on this bill I would do all that is humanly possible to ensure that, before that decision was taken, I would be as fully informed as I could be on the technical and other aspects of the bill. I read the committee's reports, I read the numerous submissions and I read the framework that was produced by the QLRC. I have taken many hundreds of emails, taken phone calls, had meetings with opposing sides, had discussions in the street and have taken the time for quiet reflection, my own time, to see how this legislation sits with me as not only a representative but also as a person—how my very own personal experiences were invoked with the memories of those loved ones passed, how they were when they were faced with their own end of life. That quiet time was aside from the thousands of lines of written for and againsts—a time when your conscience competes with the values you were taught, the values you adopt through a life long lived and the values you keep with you every day. It is also the memories of people passed—friends, loved ones, people you respect and the ones you cared for. This is where I formulated and found my answer.

My own experience of the past is raw. I, like nearly everyone you speak to today, have lost someone to a life-ending disease. The closest to me was my own father. Dad passed when he was only 46. I was 18. My memory of Dad is of a strong, driven man who took on the world without fear. He never gave up. He never gave in. He survived everything an occupying war could throw at a young man. He was essentially fearless and driven. When he was diagnosed with bowel cancer, which in 1979 was an outright death sentence, he knew through conversations with his sons that this was a battle he would lose. What I saw over that six months, because his cancer was well advanced, was this strong, brave, fearless man being whittled away to just flesh and bone. A man who endured the most unimaginable experiences in life through war was now reduced to a shell. That last image of him stays as vivid in my memory today as if it was yesterday, now 42 years on.

Would my father, if he had the option of what we debate here today—to end the intolerable, excruciating pain that wracked his body during those months that was being inflicted on him by an insidious disease, like so many others of his time and today—have taken that option? I have absolutely

no question on this. Yes, he would. Sadly, there were no laws to allow this to occur because under the laws at the time in Tasmania, as would have been the case in Queensland, it was deemed to be murder or assisted suicide, both offences under the Criminal Code that would have had the caring doctors or his sons jailed for relieving his intolerable pain.

This bill is to establish a legal framework for voluntary assisted dying in Queensland and is based on the recommendations of the Queensland Law Reform Commission's report after a nearly three-year period since this House referred an inquiry to the former health committee. I would like to put on the record my thanks for the leadership shown by our Premier and the Deputy Premier in bringing this bill to the House and acknowledge the enormous undertakings of and emotional toll on the former and current members of the committee, ably chaired by the member for Thuringowa, Aaron Harper, whom members will agree has led a massive undertaking in getting this bill before the House, with an aim of developing a draft law for Queensland that is compassionate, safe and practical.

Each year more than 20,000 Queenslanders die of life-ending conditions. This is an indisputable fact. This number will continue to increase significantly as our population grows. People with life-ending conditions deserve an option about how, when and where they die. Nowhere in this bill or in the committee's report does the government's position on this end-of-life option say that individuals will not have access to high-quality palliative care when they need it. They will. That is what all Queenslanders should expect and will receive with this government's commitment to palliative care in this state. This commitment is dedicated to delivering better access and quality of access to palliative care services to ensure all Queenslanders can access high-quality palliative care and be provided that care at the end of their life if they so choose.

It is unfortunate, however, that for some Queenslanders suffering from life-limiting conditions palliative care is unable to effectively manage their pain, symptoms or suffering. For people who wish to hasten their death to avoid the suffering, the only options currently available are to refuse medical treatment, to refuse food or hydration, palliative sedation or, horribly, suicide. These life-limiting examples take a massive toll on the person, their loved ones and the health practitioners who are supporting them.

Voluntary assisted dying has been enacted in three states: Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania. This reflects an overall movement, especially in industrialised countries, towards increased emphasis on individual autonomy in health care and a general movement towards greater community support for a person who is suffering and dying to choose the manner and timing of their own death. To face death as a result of a life-ending condition is a deeply personal experience. This bill supports these Queenslanders by allowing them the voluntary option to choose assisted dying if it is right for them.

Access to the VAD scheme will be limited to individuals who are suffering and dying. VAD would not be available to individuals who are seeking to die because they are tired of life or are not dying. In reading this bill, I believe there are appropriate safeguards written into the process to ensure this VAD Bill cannot be circumvented or manipulated by anyone who has an alternative agenda, and to say so is wrong. The process in this bill is robust and has appropriately placed assessments that ensure the eligibility criteria are continuously met at each step.

It goes without saying that this bill has very passionate advocates either way, because it is about people's values. There is no doubt that the decision I make when we vote on this bill will be disappointing to some people. I expect that. We all value life. Every moment is precious until the last breath. The concept of helping someone to die is foreign to our instinctual existence. As human beings, I understand why we would say, 'How could anyone not want to have as much time as possible with their loved ones in the final months, days and hours of their life?' This view, in large, is from those who have not been faced with their own mortality. The realisation that you will not live to see those things that we all most value in life—family, friends, community—must be daunting. It is at that time when we the ones not inflicted by a life-ending illness must place our rawest emotions and our love in their hands. The length of their life, which you, the living, do not want to see end, is not ours to determine; it is their choice and only their choice. This bill activates this option for them in their final battle, giving them the choice to decide.

In the end, death comes to all of us. For some, sadly this is taken out of their hands. For others, how we choose to die and the dignity that comes with an end-of-life option is something that a compassionate society can give its community. As I said at the start of my contribution, as I stand here I feel an enormous sense of responsibility on behalf of the clear majority of the people of the Hervey Bay electorate and Queensland but with a sense of ease with my conscience. None of us here could determine the timing of our birth but, when faced with a terminal end-of-life choice—the hardest choice—who here can say that we should not and cannot give us all a choice to determine our time of leaving this world? I am supporting this bill before the House because, as a mature, compassionate society, it is the right time to do so.