




Speech By  
**Ali King**

**MEMBER FOR PUMICESTONE**

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### **VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL**

 **Ms KING** (Pumicestone—ALP) (3.44 pm): This may be the most important speech I give in this House. I acknowledge the leadership of the Premier and the Deputy Premier down the long road to bring the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021 before this House. I was proud to serve on the Health and Environment Committee as we examined the extraordinarily significant legislation and extraordinarily carefully crafted legislation. If these laws pass unamended, Queensland will have the very best voluntary assisted dying scheme in Australia. Queenslanders deserve the very best as they face the end of their lives.

The independent Queensland Law Reform Commission set out to design laws that were compassionate, safe and practical. The Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021, as drafted, delivers on that promise. Now it is over to us as parliamentarians to make our decisions, accountable always to those we represent. A conscience vote is a rare thing—a rare chance to tune out the noise of political life and sit quietly with our values. In those moments, my conscience tells me that I was elected to serve most diligently not our most powerful but our most vulnerable. That means listening carefully to the voices of terminally ill people and those who care for them. The voices of the dying can be hard to discern against the clamour of institutions, lobby groups, religious organisations and medical professionals, but those voices have been exceptionally clear.

In the two parliamentary inquiries not one witness came before either committee to say, ‘As a dying person I do not believe Queenslanders should have a choice at end of life.’ Some said, ‘I don’t know if I personally would choose to use voluntary assisted dying’, but all wanted terminally ill people to be free to make their own decisions. Dying people told us over and over that even if they will not live to see voluntary assisted dying enacted, they want others to have choice. They told us they were not afraid of death, but of dying in pain and without dignity.

I was moved to tears by the words of Peter Belz at our committee hearing in Rockhampton. Peter lives in a faith based aged-care facility because motor neurone disease and bowel cancer mean he can no longer care for himself. He said—

The very thing that brought me to speak here tonight is that I no longer fear death; I fear living.

As parliamentarians, I believe we must listen to Peter and the thousands more people living with terminal illnesses.

It is when the voices of dying people struggle most to be heard against powerful institutions that listening to them becomes most important. I say to members: the bill before us is carefully crafted to balance the right of institutions not to be involved with their responsibilities not to unreasonably restrict terminally ill people’s access to voluntary assisted dying. Disrupting that balance will only make the path harder for dying people and their families.

Catholic Health Australia said in evidence, 'Don't legislate our conscience, we can be trusted to care and do right by our patients,' and overwhelmingly we know that that is the case. But with the very best intentions, in jurisdictions that do not have the benefit of the QLRC's careful balance, there have been breaches of trust. Like the case of Colin M who was dying of metastatic bowel cancer in Melbourne. Colin was assessed as eligible for voluntary assisted dying but his faith based aged-care facility refused to allow his medication to be delivered to him. Colin was imminently expecting to experience a bowel obstruction which meant that he would find himself vomiting his own faeces. Worse, management left Colin waiting in limbo for nine days without informing him of their refusal to allow his medication to be delivered.

In Victoria terminally ill people required to transfer out of faith based institutions to access voluntary assisted dying have routinely reported experiencing trauma and even agonising pain. In regional Queensland, where there are limited facilities to choose from, many people would not have the option to transfer and would simply lose all access to voluntary assisted dying entirely.

Ultimately, voluntary assisted dying is about people and about alleviating their suffering. Amending this aspect of the bill will reduce access for regional Queenslanders and cause additional suffering and trauma for dying people and their families. Terminally ill people have enough battles to fight. We should not make them fight powerful institutions too.

Over and over, terminally ill people told the committee that they would not be choosing between palliative care and voluntary assisted dying; they would be choosing both. The committee heard the story of a man known as Lucky Phil in the words of his daughter, Katie. Katie said—

My father didn't choose death—he chose life, he chose life, he chose life, and when life had finished with him, he chose Voluntary Assisted Dying.

I say to members: please do not use palliative care as an excuse not to support this bill.

Beverley Young is a retired specialist palliative care nurse in my electorate of Pumicestone. Bev said—

I have and always will be, the greatest advocate of effective Palliative Care, but I can attest there are numerous terminal illnesses with horrendous side effects that the very best palliative care cannot fix.

Townsville palliative care specialist Dr Will Cairns, who I am so very grateful to, said—

I am not sure those who oppose Voluntary Assisted Dying would accept it even if palliative care were available everywhere.

Janelle, who lives in northern Moreton Bay, told me—

Each visit at the palliative care home—

This was when she was visiting her dying mother—

I watched my mother try to breathe, sometimes she would stop then start up again. She lay there looking up at a ceiling. That was her life. There was no dignity and it was cruel. That's why I'm grateful for this Bill, so that if needed I can die on my terms looking at the ocean and not staring at a ceiling that isn't all that clean.

Anyone who says more palliative care is the solution to voluntary assisted dying just is not listening to dying people or those who care for them. Both provide untold comfort. Both have a role to play.

This week we also vote on behalf of the seven Queenslanders each month with a terminal illness or debilitating condition who commit suicide. These are the voices that are the very hardest to hear. In 2016-17, a total of 168 Queenslanders died in despair, usually alone and often violently. Queenslanders who do not want to see their condition through to the bitter end face heartbreaking choices.

We heard from John Ancliffe, an Ormeau man living with motor neurone disease, who said he will die sooner without access to voluntary assisted dying because he must act entirely alone to avoid incriminating his family. That did not work for Amy Nankivell's family. She told the first parliamentary inquiry that, despite her mother's lonely death, her stepfather was charged with assisting her suicide and went through a traumatic court process before eventually being found not guilty.

Family members told us of the emotional impact these decisions have on them when they could be enjoying their final months together. I want to pay particular acknowledgement to Jen Ancliffe for the testimony she gave on that point.

This week we also vote on behalf of the people whose job it is to pick up the pieces. I know that the member for Thuringowa has in particular spoken of Amy Gomes and her accounts of attending very traumatic events as a critical care paramedic. Amy has advocated to me in her role as a paramedic who works across northern Moreton Bay over a number of months now. When I was initially talking to her

about our legislation around PTSD in first responders was when she shared those stories with me, and I was profoundly moved by them. As Amy says, we must do better for terminally ill Queenslanders who want dignity and choice at the end of their lives. We can also do better for our first responders.

I am upheld in my support for voluntary assisted dying by the 80 per cent of Pumicestone residents who support these laws and comforted by the many safeguards in the bill for those who do not. Thank you to the hundreds of Pumicestone constituents who have contacted me to share that support. Recently I received a letter from Mary. Mary said—

My sister is dying from pancreatic cancer at present and it is so sad to see her suffering needlessly.

I hope that if I am ever in her situation I would have the choice of suffering or dying with dignity, as I know that I would certainly choose the latter.

Mary, I want you to know that you and your sister are in my thoughts today.

Thank you to the terminally ill people and their families who have spoken out so bravely and at a cost to you that we can never really understand. Thank you to the palliative care doctors, nurses and aged-care workers who work so closely and carefully with our dying people. Thank you to my fellow committee members for their work through this long process.

As we make these historic decisions, it is the voices of terminally ill Queenslanders we should listen to most carefully and who must be at the heart of our decisions. They deserve no less than that. I commend this bill to the House.