




Speech By
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VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Dr MacMAHON** (South Brisbane—Grn) (6.17 pm): I rise to speak in support of this legislation to allow voluntary assisted dying in Queensland. These laws before us today are the result of hard work and advocacy by so many people over many years, and I want to take a moment to acknowledge their work. Change too often happens after decades of pushing, and these reforms are long overdue. We know that the overwhelming majority of Queenslanders want these laws.

As many in this chamber today have shared, I have lost loved ones to terrible diseases. My maternal grandmother, Ruth, died of pancreatic cancer. My maternal grandfather, Keith, died of leukaemia. They had very different deaths. Ruth died painfully, and my mother shares a story of Ruth offering a nurse a thousand dollars for a cup of tea, which was refused. Keith had what my mother reports as excellent and comfortable palliative care, and he died surrounded by family 17 years ago today. They both had rich, beautiful lives and we miss them both terribly. I asked my mother and her brothers what their parents might have thought of this legislation. Perhaps neither of them would have chosen voluntary assisted dying for themselves, but they felt that their mother in particular, who was a nurse, would have wanted the option and the choice for others.

In forming my position I have had the benefit of my constituents' views as well as my party's long held support for voluntary assisted dying. I was reflecting this morning that it is some 24 years since the Greens' first push in the federal Senate to legalise voluntary assisted dying. Importantly, I know this is something that the majority of my constituents in South Brisbane would like to have in place in Queensland, and so I would like to share some words, with permission, from people in South Brisbane who have been in touch with my office. From a woman in Highgate Hill facing her own journey with cancer who writes—

Just wanted to express support for the upcoming ... bill. Having lost 4 close family members to cancer, all with drawn-out deaths, total loss of quality of life and dignity; and also as a cancer sufferer with this outcome to anticipate, I would like to live in a country which shows compassion and gives terminal patients the opportunity to exit their life with dignity and while they can, before the inevitable loss of dignity and control.

From a man in Woolloongabba writing about his wife, to whom he is providing dedicated care at the end of her life, who writes—

I implore you to support this legislation with as much vigour and determination to achieve some degree of dignity and finality.

Regarding his wife, he writes—

There is NO CURE, she will only leave the nursing home either in an ambulance to an ICU unit or a funeral service. There are only those 2 choices. How long she lingers in this dreadful state is anyone's guess, the family's only wish, the time hastens. No human being should be forced to endure such cruelty and inhumanity. We all suffer, there is no quality of life for her and others.

From a woman in Highgate Hill, a nurse who has witnessed terrible deaths who writes—

I'll just tell you why I want this law passed. I'm a practicing Catholic and an ex-nurse.

Many years ago I cared for a terminally ill woman. All morning she cried out in pain, despite having the full complement of pain relief administered. I didn't even have time to sit and hold her hand. I'll never forget her constant cries of agony. Her pain was so intractable she was given a procedure called a cordotomy, where the pain conducting nerves are destroyed. It didn't help.

I pray neither I, nor anyone I love, ever have to endure that level of suffering, and if the pain is that bad we are not left to suffer.

Please allow terminally ill people to die with dignity.

And from a woman in Kangaroo Point who cared for her husband at the end of his life she writes—

I am writing this in memory of my husband. He died in October 2020 after a protracted, debilitating and cruel illness associated with an autoimmune disease of his lungs ... There was never a day off for him. Clearing secretions was made all the more difficult because he had so little lung function left that he didn't have the physical strength to be able to cough adequately. As his condition deteriorated this became even more difficult until he was left drowning in secretion ... it was a struggle for him to eat or drink or speak and over time he wasted away and was skeletal towards the end ... We bought an enormous television which he enjoyed but in the months leading up to his death he had very little pleasure left in his life. As he often said, if you can't breathe you can't enjoy anything.

I want to take a moment to acknowledge the very real concerns that we have heard from some folks in the community about the voluntary nature of these reforms. For folks living with disability and First Nations people, disempowering experiences with the medical profession are still too common. This is also true for older people, those who do not speak English, prisoners, homeless people and those living alone without supportive families. The practice of eugenics in Australia, including forced sterilisation, is not that far behind us in the past. Submitters to the first parliamentary inquiry on this bill expressed concerns about whether every person requesting help to die is capable of making an informed decision and is free from pressure or coercion. I believe that the legislation before us meets the needs identified in this inquiry with safeguards in place to ensure that voluntary assisted dying is truly voluntary, with people making decisions about their own lives for those diagnosed with a terminal illness with a 12-month prognosis. This is something that we will need to monitor closely over the coming years.

There is so much more we can do in this place to ensure that elderly, sick and vulnerable members of our society are valued and supported to live life in the way they wish. We will keep pushing for more funding for a well-functioning palliative care system. We will keep pushing for a well funded aged-care system that ensures people have agency and independence as they age. We will keep pushing for disability support services that give people freedom and choice to live lives of their own creation. We will keep pushing for full funding for housing, education, health care and transport that allows everyone freedom from poverty, freedom from fear and freedom to live lives that explore the dazzling diversity of the human experience; freedom to enjoy clear air and water and beautiful neighbourhoods and a safe climate. This is not a fantasy, because of course we—this government—could easily do all of this by levying big corporations to fund a world where everyone, regardless of background, gets access to the things they need to live a good life.

In the same way that the Greens' view on assisted dying was dismissed by the political establishment two decades ago and is now about to become law, maybe we will see the major parties support these proposals in the coming decade. Looking at what is before us today, the narrow scope of this legislation means that only those terminally ill people who truly want to dictate the terms of their own passing will be able to do so, and the key here is choice—the choice to live our lives as we wish, the choice to love who we wish, the choice to spend time with friends, to start families, to grow gardens, to raise chickens, to join political movements, to play with our children and nieces and nephews and to enjoy beers with friends at sunset. The key here is choice, and in Queensland this week we will be legislating the choice to die with dignity.