




Speech By
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MEMBER FOR COOK

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VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Ms LUI** (Cook—ALP) (2.10 pm): I rise to speak in support of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. In doing so, I pay my utmost respects to those gone before us who, without the right to choose, would have had to endure pain and suffering in the end stages of life. I have listened to the contributions in this House and I acknowledge the families who have lost loved ones to terminal illness and the trauma and heartache of witnessing their loved one fight for life. I acknowledge that this is a very important and sensitive bill—one that requires all of us to make a conscience decision, a decision that will ultimately give someone their right to choose for dignity and peace.

The Palaszczuk government went to the 2020 election with a commitment to introduce voluntary assisted dying laws in this term of government. I would like to thank our Premier and Deputy Premier, Steven Miles, and all cabinet ministers and government for their strong support to see this important legislative reform passed through the House.

The objective of the bill is to provide people who are suffering and dying and who meet strict eligibility criteria the option of requesting medical assistance to end their lives. The bill will: ensure that the process is accessed only by persons who are assessed to be eligible; protect vulnerable persons from coercion and exploitation; provide legal protection for health practitioners, whether they choose to participate or not; and establish a Voluntary Assisted Dying Review Board and other mechanisms to ensure compliance with the act.

I respect and acknowledge the views of everyone wholeheartedly—those arguing for and those arguing against. For me, giving this speech on voluntary assisted dying is not just a contribution to a very sensitive topic but in some way helping someone whose need is far greater than mine when it comes to facing death.

I thank everyone who has contacted me and all the people who made submissions to the examination of the bill. I want to especially acknowledge the committee chair, the member for Thuringowa, Aaron Harper, members of the committee across two terms, the committee secretariat and Hansard. Thank you for your hard work in bringing this bill to the House. The time and effort that has been put into the committee process is deeply acknowledged and valued to the highest regard.

Every view and opinion shared with me is important, and I hold the deepest respect for every person with a differing point of view to mine. I want to speak to this bill through my cultural lens. I would like to respectfully acknowledge my ancestors, my family, my culture and community in this very sensitive and difficult debate.

Of course I do not speak for all First Nations people, nor do I speak for all Torres Strait Islanders, but I will share my personal reflections of my cultural traditions that guide individuals and families to cope with the traumatic ordeal of losing a loved one. Torres Strait Islanders are guided through grief and loss by a strong cultural process. These traditions are passed down through countless generations to enable individuals and family the ability to deal with grief and loss and inevitably reconcile with the loss of their loved ones.

The process usually starts when someone reaches the end of life. The whole family—immediate and extended—and community are given notice of the imminent passing of their loved ones. This allows for two things: firstly, it allows the family and community to gather to say their final goodbyes; and secondly, it provides the grieving family the opportunity to be surrounded by the love and support of their family and community. After the passing of a loved one, families and community congregate for the actual grieving process leading up to the funeral. During this time, the whole community comes together to mourn and provide solace to the grieving family to remind them that they are not alone.

Extended family and community provide moral, emotional, physical and sometimes financial support to assist families to get through difficult times. Some will bring food. Some will tell stories. Some will sing songs to keep good memories of their beloved alive. Often the stories told centre around a person's character, the impact they made and the important role they played in their family and community. Certain people of their family kinship structure automatically step up to fulfil their cultural duties and take full control over funeral arrangements to alleviate the accumulation of stress on the grieving family.

After someone is laid to rest, the grieving process continues for often years after and will only come to an end when the family is finally ready to let go. When this happens, we hold an event called a 'tombstone opening'. This is when the cross is removed from the person's graveside and replaced with a headstone. This is a significant time for the family when they can find peace after the passing of their loved ones. A tombstone opening is a significant cultural event in the Torres Strait calendar when everyone comes together to celebrate a person's life for the final time.

Torres Strait Islanders' connection to their loved ones goes beyond death and allows individuals and families to reconcile with their loss. In this job there have been many sacrifices, and the ability for me to say goodbye in my cultural obligation to my community has not been there. My recent trip to Yam Island in July meant that I could go back and reconcile with loved ones that we have lost in the community. That was my time to say goodbye and to find peace with my emotions and everything that I was going through.

As I reflect on my cultural practices in dealing with grief and loss and listening to the stories shared in this House, the one thing that we all have in common and the one thing that is missing from all of our stories is the voice of the person experiencing terminal illness and their right to choose to die in dignity. I believe this bill gives all of us the ability to reconcile with the traumatic loss of losing someone we love.

The objective of the bill is to establish a legal framework for voluntary assisted dying in Queensland, allowing eligible people who are suffering and dying to choose the timing and circumstances of their death. People with life-limiting conditions deserve choice about how and when they die. Access to high-quality palliative care is a right that all Queenslanders should expect. The Queensland government has committed an additional \$171 million investment to lead reforms in palliative care. This additional investment is dedicated to: delivering better access and equity of access to palliative care services to ensure all Queenslanders can access high-quality palliative care and achieve their goals for care at the end of life through the development of a new palliative and end-of-life care strategy; investing in community-based services; employing sufficient staff; supporting practitioners; and delivering public education and advocacy.

However, for some Queenslanders suffering from a life-limiting condition, palliative care is unable to effectively manage the pain, symptoms or suffering. For people who wish to hasten their death to avoid suffering, the only options currently available are to refuse medical treatment, refuse food or hydration, palliative sedation or suicide. This takes a toll on the person, their loved ones and the health practitioners who are supporting them.

I remember my dear friend Duncan today, as I know this was something he felt very passionate about. During one of our many conversations, he told me how much he was hoping this legislation would be passed sooner. He said that if things got worse he wanted to be given the right to make a choice. I am sorry it did not come sooner, but this is for you, my friend. I commend this bill to the House.