




Speech By  
**Jason Hunt**

**MEMBER FOR CALOUNDRA**

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### **VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL**

 **Mr HUNT** (Caloundra—ALP) (5.32 pm): I rise to give my wholehearted, sincere and very earnest support to the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. For such a transformative bill the mechanics of it are relatively easy to grasp. A person's diagnosis must be terminal and progressive and expected to cause death within 12 months and the suffering of the person must be such that they themselves determine that it is intolerable. This is an important point to make. It is the terminally ill person who is the arbiter of the suffering threshold, empowering them to not simply make the decision around ending the suffering but also around the level of suffering they are prepared to endure. This is one of the many elements of the bill that I consider to be very civilised.

A person must be 18 years of age, acting voluntarily and have the capacity to make a decision around assisted dying. Further they must meet certain prerequisites around Australian citizenship and residency in Queensland. The person can make three requests involving a coordinating practitioner and a consulting practitioner and each request must be clear and unambiguous. Naturally a health practitioner has the right to refuse involvement in any of the processes or the requests. Nor are they compelled to even provide information to another person about voluntary assisted dying—but, having refused to participate, they must still guide the individual to other health practitioners and sources of information that will meet the initial request.

I am more than satisfied that sufficient safeguards exist to protect the terminally ill person and the practitioners involved. Further, it specifically and precisely protects the rights of individuals to not be involved. Indeed, Queensland's larger institutions that are non-government healthcare providers are also able to maintain their objections to voluntary assisted dying by arranging a transfer of patients seeking voluntary assisted dying to a facility which does not object. Not one person working in one of these facilities will be asked, required or expected to participate.

This bill will not usher in a single extra death in Queensland and, in another sign of the very sensitive and civilised nature of bills of this type, we know that from the experiences in Victoria, and also the US state of Oregon, approximately a third of all people who step through every part of an assisted dying process will not take the final step. They will, however, draw enormous comfort from the fact that the option is always there if they decide to use it. There is great therapeutic value in this reassurance.

A human life is indeed a most sacred, precious and beautiful thing—nothing compares with it—but that life force, that soul, that divine spark is wholly unique and an individual thing. From the moment we draw our first independent breath, that life belongs to the individual who fills their lungs for the first time. That life can be filled with triumph or tragedy or, as is more usual, a heady mixture of both. Sadly, for some, that tragedy will include a terminal condition. The same life that was beautiful and invaluable will still be precious of course, but the terminally ill individual now has to judge for themselves how sacred it is—and make no mistake: it is their life and their decision to make.

Many people with a terminal condition will claim that they are not afraid of death. I admit that I have never fully understood that sentiment. Then I stumbled across the words of the comedian Woody Allen, who said, 'I'm not afraid of death. I just don't want to be there when it happens.' This is perhaps as good an introduction to individual end-of-life choices as any.

Having consulted with the people in my community, individually and collectively, in person and online, I am confident that my conscience vote on this topic is very much in keeping with the sentiment of my community. This is a great comfort for me, as I am so deeply committed to the rightness of voluntary assisted dying and have been for some time.

I have repeatedly referred to this bill as 'civilised' for how can it not be? How can the ultimate delivery of mercy and compassion to a newly empowered individual be anything but civilised? I will tell you something else that lends this bill an extra note of decency in my mind. It is entirely voluntary, and that is crucial to my support based on my own experiences.

Edward John Hunt—or, as he was known to me, 'Dad'—died of prostate cancer in 2005. His was a slow and gradual decline. Every month he got a little thinner, a little more frail and a little more solitary. He spent much of his final months in his bedroom, grappling with his own mortality and battling the ever-increasing pain and suffering. Yet in those final months he rediscovered at least a partial measure of his spirituality. A man whose favourite and most amusing anecdotes revolved around his railing against the Christian Brothers who educated him, this same man in the end found peace in his rekindled faith and asked to have a Catholic priest present at his grave side—much to the amazement of his family.

Jean Margaret Hunt—'Mum' by another name—had a very different journey. Her battle ended in 2014 barely four months after diagnosis, and it was as brutal as it was short. This woman raised four very decent sons, if I do say so myself. She was as gentle as a lamb, as resilient as stone and stoic to a fault in the face of suffering. Yet the end of her life was not one she deserved. In the last few weeks my brothers and I took turns sleeping at Mum's house because she needed assistance doing pretty much everything. Mum's increasingly ineffective pain meds meant frequent trips to the toilet. From Mum's bed to the loo was about 20 feet. Towards the end that tiny distance took minutes, not seconds. When she reached the toilet she required assistance.

In the last few days at Caloundra's Dove Cottage our duties as sons entailed spraying a fine mist of water into her mouth to stop it drying out and reaching in to scoop out the excessive phlegm that pooled in her cheeks as she lay in a drug-induced stupor. This was not the ending she deserved and certainly not the ending she would have chosen. Her life was no less sanctified and had she chosen assisted dying, as I am convinced she would have, it would have been no less beautiful.

The story of my parents passing is the story of choice—the story very likely of two different choices. In other words, it is the embodiment of the sentiment behind voluntary assisted dying.

My values are precious to me, but when all is said and done they are my values and I have no right to dictate how others exercise their values at the end of life. I commend this bill to the House as a genuinely transformative and beautiful step that will ensure that the last days of terminally ill Queenslanders are filled with peace and reassurance and that the last memories they gift to their families will be happy ones.