



Speech By
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MEMBER FOR IPSWICH

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VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Ms HOWARD** (Ipswich—ALP) (4.19 pm): I rise to support this bill. In so doing, I want to thank the Premier, the Deputy Premier and the health minister for bringing it to this House and for allowing us to vote with our conscience. I particularly want to thank the Health and Environment Committee in both iterations, both times led by the member for Thuringowa, who did an outstanding job. It was a long and emotionally arduous inquiry into voluntary assisted dying. We cannot underestimate the toll that that inquiry would have taken on every single member of that committee, past and present, as well as on the committee secretariat. Today's bill is testimony to the effectiveness of our parliamentary system and in particular the committee system. I want to acknowledge the Queensland Law Reform Commission. Their review was excellent and I thank them for their work.

Every year more than 20,000 Queenslanders die from an illness that cannot be cured. Research gathered in a 2016-17 survey showed that nearly every four days here in Queensland a person suffering a terminal illness is forced into a position to take their own life. The Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill is the outcome of a lengthy and sensitive conversation that Queenslanders have been having over three years about whether people should have a legal and authorised choice over the time and conditions of their death. Victoria, Western Australia, Tasmania and South Australia have already enacted VAD laws in their states and now it is our turn.

The official inquiry read thousands and thousands of submissions, and these heartbreaking stories that people relayed about their loved ones dying were fundamental in the process of establishing an official pathway for people to exercise this option to end their lives. I, too, had a lot of constituents reach out to me to share their deeply personal stories. I heard from many people from both sides of the debate and I want to acknowledge each and every one of them for taking the time and drawing on that deeper level of energy to do so. These were tough conversations, just like this debate is a very tough time for all of us. I listened to carers who were worried about their loved ones, who were vulnerable to coercion or exploitation. I also heard from medical professionals in the aged-care industry who were concerned about their own legal protection. Other members of the public were uneasy about guaranteeing that a lawful route would be offered. I myself had very real concerns about this.

After extensive deliberation and much soul searching and in no small part after listening to our dearly loved friend Duncan Pegg's final speech, I believe that this bill has robust mechanisms and safeguards in place to ensure that the process is accessed only by people who are eligible. There have been strict fortifications positioned around this bill to ensure compliance with the law: a voluntary assisted dying review board, the Health Ombudsman, the Queensland Police Service, State Coroner's office, Queensland Health and disciplinary proceedings.

Many of the stories from people shared a similar theme, mostly filled with the torment and anguish of watching their loved ones lying in agony in a bed, being unable to walk, speak or move and eventually being unable to breathe. One constituent, Susan, visited me at my office to tender her thoughts on this bill and to share what she called her 'horror' story. Her very fit and vibrant 74-year-old mother had suffered a massive ischemic stroke four months previously and was lying powerless with almost

complete unresponsiveness in a nursing home bed. The medical community had done everything they could to keep her alive, yet she had begun to refuse food and was slowly and deliberately dying in the most painful and agonising way through starvation.

Susan spoke about the heartache and a feeling of helplessness watching her mother's once strong body lying motionless. She said that once you stare helplessly into the desolate eyes of someone you love who is pleading for peace, you will be haunted forever. She experienced an overwhelming feeling of dread to see someone she loved in a state of complete paralysis—immobilised—it was horrifying. She justified her support for the bill, and her words remained with me over the course of my own research into this bill. Susan said that in certain cases we should not view voluntary assisted dying as a choice between life and death but a choice between peace and despair. In these dreadful circumstances a person should be gifted that opportunity to surrender with dignity instead of suffering an inhumane, painful end.

More than anything else, the majority of Ipswich people I spoke to told me that they felt comforted and relieved that they were going to be given a legal option of medical assistance to end either their own life or the life of family members who are tragically terminally ill and in pain. For me, this word 'option' is underscored. There was a time when I felt I could not support the bill, but overwhelmingly the take-out for me from these difficult conversations is that the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill is the best legal framework to provide Queenslanders with another option. When people are dying it is essential and just that they have all kinds of choices available to them.

Like many Queenslanders and like many members of this House, I lost my own mother to terminal cancer. I cannot say what her view would have been on voluntary assisted dying to be quite honest, but here is what I do know about her. She was incredibly strong and determined. She was undoubtedly one of the most organised and intelligent people I have ever known. Her edict when diagnosed with a terminal illness was that when she died, she wanted to have no possessions at all except maybe a spare pair of undies in her drawer and this she achieved. The other thing that was incredibly important to mum was her desire to die at home, a desire shared by most people. Sadly, this was not achieved. The last few weeks of mum's life were so fraught that we became unable to care for her at home. Despite the unending support of her wonderful husband, Keith Jones and my sister Laura's strong compassion and constant presence, I will never forget the look on mum's face when she opened her eyes and realised that she was not in her own home anymore. I felt like we had betrayed her. It was heart-wrenching.

As I said, I really do not know what mum would have done had voluntary assisted dying been available to her. However, based on her ordered personality and her deep desire to die at home, I think she would have valued the choice to die under her own terms in her own home. There are options in good quality palliative care—and my mum had great palliative care—and these options are available right across Queensland. In 2020-21 the Queensland government will spend approximately \$149 million on palliative services across the state. This government is committed to delivering significant additional funding to palliative care and by 2025 will increase spending on these critical services to \$247 million. These innovative reforms include developing a specialist palliative care workforce, supporting practitioners and providing public education and advocacy for either people who are dying or their carers.

I have concluded that this Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill should be seen as another option in a wideranging list of choices for people who are dying from a terminal illness. In Ipswich we are fortunate to have the much loved Ipswich Hospice Care, which provides first-class palliative care in a private, homely environment. It offers a seven-bed guest wing for inpatient care and a wonderful community nurse practitioner service. This amazing community organisation also offers grief and bereavement support to the whole community of West Moreton.

In addition, we are privileged to have an outstanding palliative care unit at Ipswich Hospital run by our very own local health hero Dr Ross Cruikshank, who is a medical oncologist and palliative care physician. He is a very well respected man in our community. Dr Cruikshank is a clinical leader in his field. His foresight is to provide a truly integrated model of care where those approaching the end of their life move seamlessly through the service receiving care in their place of choice—and that is the key word once again, choice.

Some of the most significant conversations I had were with the frontline aged-care medical professionals in our nursing homes. A Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union survey in February 2021 reported that 87 per cent of nurses support voluntary assisted dying. They specifically said that their members believe that patients should not be compelled to suffer beyond their wishes. A 2020 AMAQ survey of 1,200 doctors and specialists found 97 per cent were in favour of those in regional and remote communities having access to voluntary assisted dying.

Many of us do not really place much time or thought on our own deaths until we get to a point in our life where we have watched a loved one dying. These sad conversations and accounts of death and dying are, I firmly believe, good for us to be having. In fact, they should happen more often. I know that I will want to have had all of the tough conversations with my children out of the way and all of the essential administrative paperwork completed with my wishes about my own death. If I was in pain, immobilised or connected to life support, I would want to at least feel empowered enough to be officially authorised to choose how my life ends. More than anything else, I would want the whole process to be filled with love, tranquillity and made stress free for my friends, family and my children. I commend the bill to the House.