




Speech By
Lance McCallum

MEMBER FOR BUNDAMBA

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VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Mr McCALLUM** (Bundamba—ALP) (6.46 pm): I rise in support of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. If the proposed law is passed, a person with an eligible condition would be able legally to choose the timing and circumstances of their death. Voluntary assisted dying is not a choice between life and death; it is a choice for those who are dying and wish to have more control over the time and circumstances of their death. Once a fellow Queenslanders reaches the point where their death is inevitable and imminent and their suffering is intolerable, they deserve choice about how, when and where they die.

I want to acknowledge the work of both this and the previous parliaments' health committees in their comprehensive inquiries held into this bill. In particular, I acknowledge the passion and dedication shown by the chair of both committees, the member for Thuringowa. Extensive consultation has been undertaken with health practitioners, organisations, religious bodies, unions, legal bodies and, most importantly, the Queensland community. That includes people who are battling terminal illness right now, their families and the families of those with loved ones lost. It is clear from those extensive consultations that there is majority support for the introduction of voluntary assisted dying legislation in Queensland. Many Queenslanders who have watched a loved one suffer feel passionately that there must be dignified options available to everyone.

Most members in this place have been granted what is termed a conscience vote for this bill. That means that we are free of the usual party voting obligations. If, like me, you are elected to this place by your community as a member of a particular party, those are obligations that you should abide and be bound by. In my view, being free of that obligation does not mean that it is solely down to individual indulgence, however considered that may be. We are always bound to represent the views and the best interests of our communities and of Queenslanders to the best of our ability. In October last year the Premier gave a commitment to the people of Queensland that, if re-elected, we would bring these laws before parliament for consideration and that commitment has been delivered.

I have always been upfront on my view that, like the majority of the community I represent and of Queenslanders in general, I support these laws. As a democratic society, we must respect that some will be opposed to voluntary assisted dying laws. I thank those people and organisations that oppose or have misgivings about this bill for their respectful engagement. I certainly acknowledge those Queenslanders who might not support these laws or hold reservations about them, just as I hope they respect that the vast majority of Queenslanders support them.

Under these proposed laws, there are very strict criteria for accessing the scheme. Even if this strict criteria are met someone wanting to access the scheme would have to be separately and independently assessed by two doctors and make three different requests at least nine days apart from the first and the last. There will also be a review board. Medical professionals are prohibited to actively propose VAD to a patient. There are also provisions for medical practitioners to conscientiously object. Voluntary assisted dying will not be for everyone. Voluntary assisted dying will be exactly that—voluntary.

I would like to turn to the issue of palliative care. Voluntary assisted dying will not detract from, or be instead of, effective and well-resourced palliative care already being provided by the many very dedicated people working in this area. But it will provide further choice to those already dying about the timing and circumstance of their death. They will not need to stop palliative care if they are eligible for the scheme and choose to access it. In fact, in Victoria, between June 2019 and December 2020, 32 per cent of those granted a VAD substance who subsequently died did not ultimately administer the substance. This supports the idea that for many VAD is a fallback option if palliative care is not sufficient at end of life. Sadly, the reality is that, for some Queenslanders, palliative care is unable to effectively manage their pain, symptoms or suffering.

Every four days in Queensland a person suffering a terminal illness takes their own life. Due to the current limited legal options for those who are dying and wish to end their suffering, the only actions available are to refuse medical treatment, food or hydration, palliative sedation or suicide. I say that again: refuse medical treatment while you are in excruciating pain until you die, starve yourself until you die, commit suicide alone, or ask your loved ones or health professionals to commit a crime by assisting you to kill yourself. This is not acceptable. We have to do better. We must do better.

Should the best palliative care not be enough, it should not be illegal for those faced with the reality of debilitating and painful terminal illness to maintain their dignity at end of life. It is clear that the majority of Queenslanders agree, and not only from the compelling and overwhelming support shown during the formal consultation on this bill. Polling from 2020 found that 77 per cent of Queenslanders supported laws that would allow voluntary assisted dying. A 2019 Vote Compass survey, to which 105,000 Queenslanders responded, found 80 per cent supported voluntary assisted dying, with 79 per cent support from my local Bundamba community. 13 per cent either were unsure or did not know, and just nine per cent disagreed. This was evidenced by the overwhelming support in emails and phone calls to my office in the lead-up to these laws being considered. It was also evident at the Bundamba community forum I held on 24 August.

I want to thank each and every person in my local community who took the time to contact me about these laws. Many were incredibly personal stories and I will, with permission, share one of these powerful and deeply felt stories. Alex from Bellbird Park said—

I lost a family member to pancreatic cancer and their final few weeks were sadly very painful and distressing for our family.

My mother also works as a Registered Nurse in a rural Queensland aged care nursing home, and despite their best efforts to make sure people are comfortable in their end of life care, with high numbers of residents and limited nursing staff, limited on-call rural doctors etc, she often expresses to me that 'not everyone has a peaceful or pain free death'.

My hope is that parliament can make the right call on this issue and we can bestow the same kindness to people that we do to our beloved pets when they are sick or suffering.

There are so many more powerful stories in our local community and right across the state, and we have heard many in this debate. Like most, I have personal experience of the terrible impact of terminal illness on family and friends. I want to pay personal tribute to Peter Simpson, the late secretary of the Electrical Trades Union, who lost his life to cancer last year. Even though you are no longer with us, your shoulder is still at the wheel and your last great campaign is nearing its end.

I pay tribute to the late member for Stretton, Duncan Pegg. Peggy, we listened. For those who this law, should it pass, has come too late, I can only say I am sorry it could not come sooner. To the many thousands of supporters and campaigners whose selfless dedication and passion to seeing these laws come before parliament, I give my deep gratitude.

This bill is about giving choice to those in our community who are living with the reality of debilitating, painful, terminal illness. This is about empowerment. It is about giving people choice. It is about Queenslanders supporting Queenslanders to make choices for themselves. It is about people being given autonomy to make their own decisions about their end of life. These laws are about giving people back dignity and control in circumstances where it has been ripped away from them. Most importantly, it is about compassion in the face of terrible suffering. I commend the bill to the House.