




Speech By
Hon. Leanne Linard

MEMBER FOR NUDGEES

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VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL

 **Hon. LM LINARD** (Nudgee—ALP) (Minister for Children and Youth Justice and Minister for Multicultural Affairs) (2.19 pm): I rise to make my contribution to the debate on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. It has been a privilege to hear the contributions of others in this chamber, which has often included stories of their experience with the death and dying of significant people in their lives or the stories shared by those they represent. Stories are powerful; lived experience is powerful. Both should be respected.

Earlier this year I put a call out to the people of my electorate to share their stories, thoughts and concerns in preparation for this important debate. Over 500 did. It was not a poll, but a request and an opportunity for my community to have their say. I promised I would read every response, and I did. I sincerely thank everyone who reached out for doing so and for their honesty. It was not easy at times to read those responses. Many were raw, contained the pain of grief and/or graphic accounts of the journey to death of loved ones. Some shared the journey they themselves are on. Others spoke of fear, still others of hope; some of anger at the debate we are now having, many imploring—but most spoke of compassion. That ultimately is the perspective from which I approach this debate.

One story I was particularly moved by, and that I was given permission to share by his granddaughter, was that of Ian. Ian was a family man, a farmer, and he was in terrible pain with a deteriorating muscle condition. Every Friday he would drive his beloved wife to the hairdresser. He would then pick her up, take her home and make her a cup of tea before heading out to do work on the property. There was nothing different about the Friday when Ian did not come. He collected his wife as usual from the hairdresser, made her a cup of tea, then headed out to the bottom paddock—where he took his life with a shotgun. The family knew he was in pain, possibly even knew the pain could not be managed, but he never complained. They suspect he did not want to burden them. They soon discovered he had paid the bills in advance for a year and ordered his wife's favourite magazine for two. The despair, the thoughts for his family until the last, and the total clarity of mind that these actions belie are deeply moving. This is but one story shared with me.

I would like to own from the outset that I have found this debate challenging. I have reservations about elements of the bill. I feel heavy of heart. In every dying person's journey there is a time when they are told there is no hope of remission or recovery and that life is limited. But while life is limited, dignity should not be. While this is a conscience vote, I remain answerable to the people of my beloved north side community, Nudgee, and it is for them that I now outline my reasons for supporting the passage of this bill. Many Queenslanders have a story that has informed their position on this important debate. I shared just one earlier. Like many others I have experienced the loss of family and friends, but it is without doubt the loss of my parents that has indelibly informed my position on this debate, so I share a small part of that journey now.

When I was 18, my father was diagnosed with an aggressive brain tumour and given 12 months to live. He lived for 13 months. He had a brilliant mind. He had been an aeronautical engineer and pilot in the RAAF. Almost overnight he went from flying and building aircraft to having difficulty reading and

dialling a phone number. Cancer stole much from him, but his death was what they call a good death. He remained at home until a few months before his death, when he was moved to a private hospice. It was a beautiful place on a lake with total privacy for our family and amazing staff. His pain was well managed, and he slipped away in his sleep as I held his hand at the age of 50. This is the death I would wish for.

Six months after my father died, at 46 my mother was diagnosed with advanced ovarian cancer and given three years to live. In the end we had eight precious years and she died at the age of 53. Her journey was very different. She had quality years despite the roller-coaster of endless chemotherapy, blood tests and hospital admissions. CA125 counts became what we lived by. She was admitted to the Wesley Hospital palliative care ward three months before her death. I cannot speak highly enough of her treating doctor and all of the staff on that ward. Her death came slowly. The cancer was pervasive and strangling her internal organs, but her body was young and her will to live tremendously strong. She feared suffering—a universal fear, I think—and she did suffer. I will not go into the details of those last few weeks and days—it is not necessary and it would not be honouring to her or kind to all of you—other than to say that they were some of the most traumatic of my life. But she brought me into this world, and I would never have been anywhere but there holding her hand as she left it.

One of the arguments against legalising voluntary assisted dying is that there is no pain that cannot be managed with palliative care. I respect those views, but I have lived experience of the opposite. So do many of my constituents, who shared heartbreaking stories of loved ones who died in pain and desperation. The AMA itself recognises that there are some instances where it is difficult to achieve satisfactory relief of suffering. How long will we continue to overlook that suffering?

Much has rightly been said during this debate about palliative care. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the increase in investment by our government, but I also take this opportunity to say that more is needed and we must answer that call. It is equally a question of providing dignity.

Some in my community have raised faith or religious based concerns with regard to legalising voluntary assisted dying and institutional conscientious objection. The Nudgee electorate has a long and strong connection to the Catholic community. Many have reached out to me, including the Sisters of Mercy, the Nudgee seminary, the Australian Catholic University and the Sisters of Saint Joseph at Nundah, as have ministers from other denominations, to voice their concerns; others of faith to voice their support. I thank them for doing so and for their honesty. I will always listen and think deeply on their representations, both as their state member and as a person of deep faith myself. The element of this debate I have struggled most with is the idea of voluntarily ending a life. Both of my parents fought so hard to live; we fought so hard to keep them. For some time I could not see a clear way forward with regard to my position on these reforms.

At a meeting here in parliament earlier this year I posed the same struggle to professors Ben White and Lindy Willmott of the Australian Centre for Health Law Research at QUT. I know them from chairing past health inquiries and I respect them both tremendously. In response to my question Ben said something so simple yet profound for me in my journey: 'It isn't a choice of life or death. That choice has already been taken away. It's a choice of what sort of death they will experience.' I came directly from that meeting to the chamber just in time to see Duncan Pegg rise to his feet and deliver that extraordinary valedictory speech where he echoed the words of my parents and so many of my constituents in the stories they shared: they had fought every day to live.

For me the decision was made, and is one entirely based, on compassion. Though vexed, if a decision is required to be made between the two, compassion for the individual must always be held in higher regard than the rights of an institution. The absolute majority of constituents who contacted me were unequivocal in their support for this legislation. I honour their calls today. It is with a heavy heart that I know I will also disappoint others, including some who are very dear to me, but politics is about having the difficult conversations and making difficult choices in the service of others.

I would like to thank Duncan Pegg, professors Ben White and Lindy Willmott, Andrew Denton, the members for McConnel and Bulimba, and my wonderful husband Ian for the support, clarity, kindness, information and advice they have offered me on the journey to today. Whether I was struggling with a legal concept, a values question or the toll that robust lobbying can take, all have at various times made my journey easier. For Ian, that is every day, always. I would also like to thank the Premier for affording our caucus a conscience vote on this bill and to acknowledge the way that she protects the integrity of such votes. Equally, I would like to thank the Deputy Premier, who always makes time to listen and is always genuine in his response to issues raised.

I would like to acknowledge the work of all members of the health committee, chaired by the member for Thuringowa both in this term and last term, on this debate. They provided all Queenslanders with the opportunity to have a say and dedicated countless hours to public hearings. It could not have

been easy. I thank them for their service to this parliament and this debate. Difficult conversations can be triggering and these sorts of debates take a toll. I hope that everyone in this House is supported. It can make such a difference to reach out even to just one colleague you are close to and say, 'Are you okay?' We are all human, and if this debate has taught us anything it is that the human condition is fragile.

I do not know if either of my parents would have considered voluntary assisted dying, but I believe they would have wanted the choice. People deserve to live and be treated with dignity; equally, people deserve to die with dignity, free from pain and with choice. I support the bill before the House.