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Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee Inquiry
Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
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Dear Senators,

RE: Medical Services (Dying with Dignity) Exposure Draft Bill 2014 prepared by Senator Richard Di Natale

I write to you to express our deepest concerns about the proposed bill and euthanasia and assisted suicide in general.

While we must exercise profound compassion and care for all Australians experiencing the difficulties of a terminal condition, we must also do everything we can to provide a crystal clear message about the value of every human life in the way that we care.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide are not compassionate responses to what are, certainly, difficult and challenging realities.

We can easily understand that news of a difficult prognosis will likely spark anxiety and fear in the person concerned as well as for their families. There is so much about the dying process that is as individual as each of us and, for the most part, our society shields us from the reality of death; making it all the more mysterious and foreboding.

But the answer should not come via a lethal syringe or drug cocktail. That would be the end of choice; an act of despair and abandonment. We should not be abandoning those in our care - even those who in desperation might ask for euthanasia or assisted suicide - they deserve the very best of care.

We question also the effect that such a law would have on the medical profession. Taking an action to either kill or to provide the means for a patient to kill themselves has been anathema to medicine for millennia. Embodied in the dictum *primum non nocere*, do no harm, to break from this commonly held understanding not only casts the doctor in a role contrary to his or her training, it also implicitly visits upon them the decision about whether a person's life is or is not worth living. It becomes the doctor's choice.

I recognise that people who support the notion of euthanasia or assisted suicide will often do so for compassionate reasons. I think that it is fair to observe that this is principally why polling on the issue returns such high levels of support. But the motivation to compassion also requires right action. Killing in this context is never right action; nor is providing a lethal substance. We can and must do better than that.

As you will know, the Church, through her hospital networks, is the largest provider of palliative care services in Australia. Such services provide the very best of care. We need to continue to explore how we can ensure that every Australian has access to such care on an equitable basis.

We need also to look to ways of providing such services for care in the home rather than in a hospice setting wherever possible. This provides for real choice for people; many of whom, we know, would rather die at home in familiar surroundings. This should be our goal.

I recognise that Senator Di Natale's bill brings with it a necessary discussion about whether or not the Commonwealth can legislate on this matter and that discussion hinges upon whether or not euthanasia and/or assisted suicide is a 'medical service'. The practice of medicine is concerned with the diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease. Logically, a 'medical service' is an act focussed on achieving those ends. I cannot see how killing a patient or providing him or her with the means fits within any of these objectives.

In closing, though our modern world celebrates and rightly endorses autonomy of the individual we must not fail to recognise that we all share relationships to persons, entities and to society wherein we find our autonomy rightly limited by the notion of the 'common good'. None of us has the right to act in ways that compromise others rights. This notion finds its clearest expression in and through the workings of our system of government which has as its principal objective the protection of the rights of all citizens, especially the weak and the vulnerable.

Our laws against deliberate killing and assisting in a person's suicide have stood the test of time and serve us well. Euthanasia and assisted suicide compromises that protective function of the law.

Yours sincerely,

Most Rev Philip Wilson DD JCL
Archbishop of Adelaide