

Inquiry into Suicide in Australia

The inquiry of the Senate Community Affairs References Committee into the impact of suicide on the Australian community is welcomed, in particular given its focus upon specific groups (eg. older Australians).

To date in Australia, there has been little effort or inclination to problematise suicide. All too often in public discourse and the academic literature, suicide is constructed and understood as a societal ill that needs address and prevention.

This inquiry recognizes in its terms that suicide impacts differently upon different groups within the Australian community. As such, as Director of Exit International I would like to focus upon the experiences of older Australians and their knowledge, attitude and practices where suicide is concerned.

For Australian seniors, suicide is not necessarily a phenomenon which needs to be feared or guarded against. As Australia's foremost assisted suicide advocacy organization, for more than a decade our members have actively sought pro-suicide information. They say knowledge of their end of life choices helps prepare them for the future.

Many tell us in surveys and interviews that they believe they have a right to die peacefully using a method that is reliable at a time and place of their choosing.

Some of our 4000 strong members have witnessed the awful, prolonged deaths of their own parents and loved ones. Others simply want the assurance that comes from knowing that they are in control; in control to suicide should their quality of life ever take a turn for the worse.

For these respected members of our community, suicide prevention is neither desired nor should it be always and everywhere be seen as a cost.

To allow rational seniors of sound mind access to information that outlines suicide methods that are both peaceful and dignified is the very least that a modern civil Australia should be striving towards.

Suicide for many older Australians is far from a 'social cost'. Rather, knowledge of it is a benefit – not simply as many say, by saving precious health dollars being spent on extended and sometimes unwanted end of life care. But there is a benefit that comes at an ontological level when our most respected citizens feel a sense of comfort and reassurance from knowing they are free to leave when and if they should decide.

Deciding when and how one should die is a corollary to living a fine upstanding life. Failing to acknowledge that suicide, in some situations, is an attribute of mature and caring society is simplistic if not naïve.

Exit members come from all walks of life and include: retired judges, lawyers, writers, actors, teachers, health professionals, accountants, company directors, as well as many from all ordinary walks of life. That Holocaust survivors have a disproportionately high representation amongst the Exit community is itself testimony to the high value that can be placed on dying well at a time of one's choosing.

Exit International and myself as Founder and Director would welcome the opportunity to expand upon the above to the Committee. I am available to travel to Canberra at the Committee's convenience.

Finally, in closing, I attach the suicide note of Sid and Marjorie Croft who died in 2002. Their sentiments speak well to the themes outlined above.

Importantly the Crofts are far from exceptional. In this inquiry the Committee has a unique opportunity to acknowledge the experiences of these people and the thousands of other older Australians just like them.

Appendix

Suicide Letter

To Whom it May Concern

Please don't condemn us, or feel badly of us for what we have done.

We have thought clearly of this for a long time and it has taken a long time to get the drugs needed.

We are in our late 80s and 90 is on the horizon. At this stage, would it be wrong to expect no deterioration in our health? More importantly, would our mental state be bright and alert?

In 1974 we both lost our partners whom we loved very dearly. For two and a half years Marjorie became a recluse with her grief, and Sid became an alcoholic. We would not like to go through that traumatic experience again. Hence we decided we wanted to go together.

We have no children and no one to consider.

We have left instructions that we be cremated and that our ashes be mixed together. We feel that way, we will be together forever.

Please don't feel sad, or grieve for us. But feel glad in your heart as we do.

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