

The Secretariat,
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee,
Room S1.61, Parliament House,
Canberra, ACT 2600

Dear Sirs,

Criminal Code Amendment (Suicide Related Material Offences) Bill 2004

West Australian Voluntary Euthanasia Society objects to the proposed Criminal Code Amendment (Suicide Related Material Offences) Bill 2004 and submits that it is undemocratic, unethical, inhumane, unfeeling and shows an alarming underlying ideological bent of mind.

Suicide was excised from the Criminal Code because the society here and in nearly every country agreed that everyone has an inherent and unalienable right to ones' life, to live or to end at one's own choice. No one should be incited or encouraged to commit suicide, but no one should be denied compassion and succour either.

Persons considering and contemplating suicide usually do not go public with their problems. The main reason for the reticence being that a very vocal and influential section of the community has forced the society to view the subject of suicide as taboo. The result is that the sufferers seldom get any help and sympathy which is perhaps their most important need and are craving for. They require information and advice, not condemnation and contempt. To deny them the help will be inhuman and yet that is what this Bill advocates. If passed, it will require that the society withholds any help from the very people who are in most need of such help

This Society's aim is to legalise voluntary euthanasia. One of the many reasons we put forward for that legalisation is the chilling statistic that one of the largest number of suicides in the country is among persons of over 75 and that the largest proportion of those die by hanging. Their cries for help usually go unanswered. Most of our members, while lobbying for legalisation of voluntary euthanasia, are looking for a physician assisted painless process of dying - a dignified, gentle and peaceful end of life. While we can not help them in that, we have a duty to plead for their right to up-to-date information and advice.

The law makers should either legalise euthanasia or let this vulnerable section of the community gather any help and information they can. It will be cruel to shut off the most important source of information. It will be heartless and hypocritical.

No one is able to claim that inciting suicide has reached an alarming proportion or that the vulnerable people are being encouraged to commit suicide. But we do know that persons have and are committing suicide in the most horrendous ways possible, and all because they were unable to source or were deprived of meaningful information and help from a compassionate and sympathetic society. Anyone providing such information should be encouraged and commended, not condemned and hampered or made out to be a criminal.

If the Senate passes this Bill, it will only drive suicide information underground. One is reminded of the situation existing before abortion was made legally available. Just as that has saved lives in spite of dire predictions of the dogmatic opponents, a softer, gentler and more compassionate approach towards suicide will also save lives, certainly will save suffering.

We do not have to point out that this Bill will be an attack on free expression, freedom of information and will be tantamount to censorship. Is that what the Parliament has in mind?

The Minister has assured us that the Bill will in no way affect the debate on law reform regarding voluntary euthanasia. This is indeed reassuring, but will the Parliament also assure us on any unintended consequences of this legislation? We do not know how this legislation will be used by an unsympathetic authority to stifle debate and discussion. We are concerned that this legislation will affect our ability to communicate, advise, discuss, and generally have a meaningful debate on the subject of legalisation of voluntary euthanasia.

We submit that this Bill has been the result of wilful ignorance and has been put up as an act of deliberate cruelty. It is dogmatic fundamentalism at its worst. It should be nipped in the bud before it creates more mischief.

Yours faithfully,
Ranjan Ray
President
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