

**Submission to the Senate Legal
and Constitutional Affairs
Committee re: The Rights of the
Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws
Repeal) Bill 2008.**

By way of introduction, I am a medical practitioner, currently working at a public hospital in Victoria. I am actively involved in ethics and have served on hospital clinical ethics committees and an independent ethics board. I am a Christian, and attend an Anglican church. Each of these, I believe, provides some relevant insights on questions related to euthanasia.

During my time as a doctor, I have been asked directly to carry out euthanasia on several occasions. At each time, I was grateful for the security provided by the law against euthanasia because it allowed me to clearly explain the boundaries of what was acceptable practice. For the vast majority of patients who do not want to commit suicide, our current laws prohibiting assisted suicide give patients permission to talk freely to their doctors about their feelings and concerns surrounding death without fear of coercion or pressure towards euthanasia. This creates a helpful environment for exploring palliative options and good medical treatment within a trusting doctor-patient relationship. I believe that laws permitting euthanasia would inevitably lead to an erosion of trust in this relationship, and deterioration in medical care surrounding death.

An example from my own experience stands out in my mind when thinking about euthanasia legislation. It came from a family who asked me to kill their mother, already suffering from quite advanced dementia, after she was diagnosed with rectal cancer. I believe that they loved her and were intending to protect her from pain, however, at that time she was not troubled by any pain or distress. The law against euthanasia meant that I could say 'no' while exploring their question and reassuring them that everything would be done to take care of their mother and preserve her dignity. When she passed away in a palliative care unit several days later, she was comfortable and surrounded by her family. If this conversation had happened in The Netherlands, where euthanasia, and now non-voluntary euthanasia, is legal, I would have been forced to discuss the possibility of assisted suicide with them. I believe that the law against euthanasia allowed me to provide appropriate palliative care for this woman while maintaining a supportive relationship with her family.

The experience of other countries where euthanasia has been legalised, particularly The Netherlands, has been generally acknowledged as at best problematic. Since the introduction of assisted suicide, euthanasia has been extended both to children and to people who have neither specifically sought to die nor consented. There has been well-documented evidence of financial pressures on doctors and hospitals to encourage

euthanasia, while patients and families have also reported considerable social and medical pressure towards assisted suicide. From my external perspective, the Dutch experience with the introduction of assisted suicide appears to have led to a degradation of palliative care services, increasing amounts of euthanasia and repeated expansion of the scope of euthanasia provisions. These are worrying trends, and ones that would be extremely harmful in Australian society.

As a Christian, I consider human life to be made in God's image, and so to be extremely valuable. This is something seen clearly in the Bible and throughout the history of the Christian church. Australia's legal system has incorporated the significance and inviolability of human life, and rightly and consistently seeks to defend especially the weak and vulnerable. Our laws against murder and the death penalty reflect a systematic desire to protect human life and to affirm its value, and these desires and values are further advanced through laws that prevent assisted suicide. Legalising assisted suicide would run counter to these central tenets of our society and legal system, and would reflect a significant weakening of our commitment to, and respect for, human life.

I do not believe that the (re)introduction of euthanasia into any Australian state or territory is in the best interests of people with terminal illnesses, the medical profession or Australian society. Accordingly, I would strongly encourage Members to vote against the Rights of the Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill.

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