

Mr Peter Hallahan
Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs
Department of the Senate
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Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

The following submission is made by and for the ACT Branch of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of NSW, representing 140 financial members living in the ACT, to support the Rights of the Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill 2008.

The 1997 Federal Act was remarkable in overturning the decision of the elected representatives of a constituent part of a country which, as a federal state, is based on the division of power between two levels of government. Such an action should have no place in a democratic system which is founded on acceptance of the will of the people properly expressed.

The VESNSW (ACT Branch) has as its aim the support of a right for the terminally ill to seek to end their life when pain becomes unbearable and there is no reasonable hope of cure. It is clear that at least 70%, in some polls 80%, of Australians support a right to voluntary euthanasia. It is virtually certain that the proportion among older people would be higher; and as the people most concerned their view should have special force. The time has come for our elected representatives to start to take account of these undisputed facts.

What these people want is VOLUNTARY euthanasia, i.e. the freedom to exercise their own will. They have no wish to impose anything on others.

Most practising physicians could cite pitiable cases of patients in the last throes of illness who long for release. Some who are able will make attempts to end their lives, often with traumatic results for themselves and others. Palliative care, when and if it is available, can help to reduce physical suffering in many cases, but by no means in all. Many doctors would in fact have helped to achieve release, but it would be unwise for them to say so publicly. Some admit to the 'double effect' device of administering prescribed pain relief medicines which have the effect of shortening life. It is a serious problem for a society when medical practitioners are unable to speak of things which are widely recognised to occur. It is high time for this destructive anomaly to be addressed.

The argument of the "slippery slope", often used, has now been disproved by the clear evidence from several jurisdictions which have already for years allowed voluntary

euthanasia - with careful conditions. This is quite plain in statistics from the Netherlands, as well as Oregon in the U.S.; and Belgium has now adopted similar legislation.

Arguments that older people will be exploited by being pressured into decisions to die are disproved by anecdotal and any other evidence available. Younger family members are more likely to resist the rationally thought-out wishes of an older member to seek release. We therefore encourage our members to have clear Health Direction (ACT) and Enduring Power of Attorney documents.

Our Society urges our Federal Parliamentarians to make a sober and dispassionate analysis of the facts, and to act on it.

Yours sincerely,

Beryl Rawson
Chair, ACT Committee of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of NSW,