

8th April 2008

The Committee Secretary
Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee
Department of the Senate
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra
ACT 2600

Dear Sir/Madam,

Opposition to the Rights of the Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill 2008

I am writing in my personal capacity as a doctor who has been living and working in the Northern Territory since 2005, having received part of my medical school training in the Northern Territory, and as the only doctor in Alice Springs Hospital to speak an Aboriginal language.

I oppose the legalisation of euthanasia in general, because a doctor should never have the duty to kill another human. Many others have already written eloquently on this matter, so I shall not elaborate those arguments presently.

In addition to my general objections, I have specific objections to legalising euthanasia in the Northern Territory, especially with reference to the indigenous population here. Over 31% of the NT population are indigenous, the largest percentage of any jurisdiction in this country,¹ therefore their health needs must not be ignored in this debate.

There exists much documentation that the indigenous Australian population in general carries an unfair burden of disease,² with a life expectancy that is about 17 years younger than the average life expectancy in this country.³ The health outcomes for the indigenous population in the NT are particularly appalling, including:

- An infant mortality rate that is almost double that of other states;⁴
- A rising suicide rate of indigenous males;⁵
- A disproportionate number of deaths of indigenous men in motor vehicle accidents;⁶

¹<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/ProductsbyCatalogue/14E7A4A075D53A6CCA2569450007E46C?OpenDocument>

²<http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/ProductsbyCatalogue/C36E019CD56EDE1FCA256C76007A9D36?OpenDocument>

³Zhao Y, Dempsey K. Causes of inequality in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, 1981–2000: a decomposition analysis. MJA 2006; 184 (10): 490-494

⁴<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/d37892d01d1832c3ca2570ec000ace6e!OpenDocument>

⁵Measey MAL, Li SQ, Parker R, Wang Z. Suicide in the Northern Territory, 1981-2002. MJA 2006; 185 (6): 315-319

- A larger proportion of indigenous patients who are sicker and younger than their non-indigenous counterparts who require admission into intensive care units.⁷

As has been highlighted recently by the current Federal Government, this embarrassing gap in life expectancy and the horrendously poor health in the NT must be changed, with a promise of more resources to be allocated for this purpose.⁸ Therefore **it is most illogical and ironic that large amounts of resources are being poured into extending people's lives, while at the same time there is even consideration of legalising doctors to kill people within the same population.** The resources that are being put into the legalisation of euthanasia should be redirected to decreasing the gap in life expectancy – that would certainly be a more effective use of resources from a public health standpoint.

There are many health professionals like myself who are committed to improving the health and survival of the indigenous population on a day to day basis. Therefore to even suggest that the premature and voluntary termination of adult life should be legalised undermines the importance of my work and the work of my colleagues in the NT.

If the indigenous population of the NT carries a disproportionately large share of the disease burden, then it is only fair that they get a disproportionate amount of say in the legalisation of euthanasia. I am therefore very concerned at the efforts –or lack thereof– that have been made to gauge the opinions of the indigenous population in the NT.

Senator Bob Brown said in his speech to Parliament that "In 1995, the Parliament of the Northern Territory passed a law which reflected [...] the will of Northern Territorians".⁹ Is he sure that the will of the indigenous Territorians are adequately heard? I suspect not. I note that only a very small minority of the submissions into the Bill inquiry is from the indigenous population of the NT.¹⁰ Why have their views not been widely represented in this Bills Inquiry? Could it be because many of them have very limited English literacy¹¹ which might prevent them from reading the proposals and responding with written submissions?

In the same speech, Senator Bob Brown quoted a Newspoll from February 2007 commissioned by Dying with Dignity Victoria. The telephone survey may have found 80% of the people randomly selected for telephone interview supported euthanasia,¹² but I must question if that result at all represents the opinions of the indigenous people of the NT. Considering that many indigenous people in the NT, especially in remote areas, do not have a working telephone line at home or even a public telephone in their community,¹³ then how can their views for or against voluntary euthanasia be adequately represented in a telephone survey?

I have heard an anecdotal account that when euthanasia was legalised in the NT in the 1990s, some indigenous Territorians refused to have immunisations and therapeutic intramuscular

⁶Treacy PJ, Jones K, Mansfield C. Flipped out of control: single-vehicle rollover accidents in the Northern Territory. MJA 2002; 176 (6): 260-263

⁷Stevens D. Critical illness and its impact on the Aboriginal people of the Top End of the Northern Territory, Australia. Anaesth Intensive Care 2003; 31: 294-299

⁸http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Release/2008/media_release_0143.cfm

⁹http://parlinfoweb.aph.gov.au/piweb/view_document.aspx?ID=2514385&TABLE=HANSARDS

¹⁰http://www.aph.gov.au/Senate/committee/legcon_cte/terminally_ill/submisssions/sublist.htm

¹¹<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,20312197-13881,00.html>

¹²<http://www.dwdv.org.au/Docs/DWD%20Summary%20Newspoll%20Report%202007.pdf>

¹³<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/2f762f95845417aeca25706c00834efa/2e1d3b9176cc05b6ca2570eb00835394!OpenDocument>

injections because of the perception that doctors could intentionally kill people with those injections. I suspect that is not an isolated anecdote, which would show that **the understanding of euthanasia amongst the indigenous population of the NT is pitifully low.**

Has any significant effort been made to help indigenous people in the NT understand euthanasia and this Bill? I suspect not. Until I see evidence of the proponents of euthanasia visit remote indigenous communities with competent interpreters of the respective indigenous languages, I am not prepared to believe that over 30% of NT residents have understood the issue and adequately expressed their viewpoints.

More importantly, a large amount of resources would be required to adequately educate the NT's indigenous population about the right to ask for a doctor to kill them. Such a use of resources is completely inappropriate in light of the fact that these people are already dying prematurely of preventable diseases at an embarrassingly high rate – diseases that are badly in need of resources to prevent.

In short, before anyone claims that there is overwhelming support for voluntary euthanasia in the NT, the following must be done to ensure that the informed views of the 30% of the NT population are adequately heard:

- ensure that everyone in the NT can read and write English to a nationally accepted minimum standard, such that everyone can understand the issues surrounding euthanasia;
- provide everyone in the NT with easy access to a telephone line so that everyone can have fair access to random telephone surveys regarding euthanasia;
- stop people from dying prematurely from preventable illnesses (suicide, motor vehicle accidents, violence, rheumatic heart disease etc.) so that they can live long enough to suffer from age-related diseases that provide the impetus for euthanasia.

Once these things are done, then perhaps the views of the indigenous Territorians of euthanasia can be fairly sought.

To legalise euthanasia in the NT is wrong; it is even more wrong to assume that indigenous Territorians understand and are supportive of the concept; it is even more wrong still to allow people in the NT to choose death when 30% of the population hardly have the freedom to choose to live long and dignified lives.

Yours sincerely,

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