

Submission on the Rights of the Terminally Ill (Euthanasia Laws Repeal) Bill 2008 to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Affairs Committee

My name is Lorraine Erlandson, I am of Aboriginal descent and come from Alice Springs, and have extensive contacts with indigenous peoples from all over the Northern Territory through my work as an Indigenous Educator at Nungalinga College in Darwin.

Most of the people I deal with are traditional Aboriginal adults from remote communities who come to Darwin to participate in the VET programs offered at Nungalinga College. For many of these adult students English is a second or third language. In their communities they are unfamiliar with mainstream hospital practices and with professional medical language. When receiving medical attention and when hospitalized they can be uncertain and even fearful when they do not adequately understand the medical treatment or procedures that are being explained to them. Translators are not always available, and medical terminology often can not be translated.

Death is of great cultural significance for Aboriginal people and is accompanied by traditional practices and rituals. It is highly inappropriate and culturally repugnant to propose Euthanasia as a means of ending human life to Aboriginal people. From my experience and knowledge of traditional Aboriginal people and the facts I have already stated, I am deeply concerned that if Euthanasia once again becomes legal in the Northern Territory, Aboriginal people who are in need of medical attention may be reluctant to seek treatment for fear that if treatment is unsuccessful they may be compelled to accept Euthanasia.

Aboriginal people, who comprise a significant part of the Northern Territory population, already live with impoverishment and disadvantage. The Emergency Response of the Australian Government is endeavouring to redress this devaluing of Aboriginal people by providing improved health care, education, opportunity and support for families and communities. Prime Minister Rudd has committed to closing the life expectancy gap between indigenous and other Australians. Illness and disease are medical conditions. Human life is not a medical condition and is valued by Aboriginal people regardless of illness or disease. Euthanasia treats human life as if it is an illness or disease and thus is unacceptable to Aboriginal people. Providing better medical services and treatment for the diseases that afflict Aboriginal people, palliative care for those with terminal illness, and culturally appropriate nursing care for those nearing the end of life is a much better response to the needs of Aboriginal people than is euthanasia. A re-introduction of Euthanasia in the Northern Territory risks undermining the best outcomes for Aboriginal people of the Emergency Response.

I earnestly urge the Senators who are considering the repeal of the Euthanasia Laws Act 1997 to reject any attempt to once again legalise Euthanasia in the Northern Territory, knowing that by doing so the best interests of Aboriginal Territorians are being honoured.



Lorraine Erlandson





9th April, 2008