

Voluntary Euthanasia

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN
VOLUNTARY EUTHANSIA
HEALTH AND AGEING

Euthanasia laws should give people who are terminally ill or dying in great distress choice in the timing and manner of their deaths. Such laws should provide clarity to family, friends and health professionals in supporting an individual's choices when faced with the prospect of an unpleasant death.

“Behind closed doors many people are suffering. Legislative change is difficult to implement and many of those who need it most are just too ill to promote it, so will just use self help methods to relieve the unrelenting pain and suffering caused by chronic and terminal illnesses.”

Mary Walsh
Your Choice in Dying

Our Action Plan

- nationally consistent voluntary euthanasia laws with sophisticated safeguards for end of life decisions based on the following principles:
 - patients in a state of mental competence, with a terminal or incurable illness that creates unrelievable, profound suffering would have the right to choose to die in a manner acceptable to themselves and not be compelled to suffer beyond their wishes
 - no individual, group or organisation would be compelled to either participate or not participate in the assisted voluntary euthanasia of a sufferer
 - providing advice, assistance or support to a sufferer, their relatives or guardian regarding voluntary euthanasia, or to be present at the time would not constitute an offence
 - assistance in voluntary euthanasia to be provided in all cases by doctors
- training for health professionals in clinical practice guidelines for communicating prognosis and end-of-life issues
- patients to be given the right to make advance care directives (advance care plans provide information on an individual's decisions regarding end-of life choices under a range of circumstances) and to have them respected
- increase funding for and availability of palliative care
- recognising that voluntary euthanasia is a complex ethical issue, ensure that legislation that governs it is developed by a representative cross-party Parliamentary committee following extensive community consultation and debate and is decided on a conscience vote

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The Issues

It is now more than 10 years since the Federal Government overturned the Northern Territory's Rights of the Terminally Ill Act. For supporters of the choice to die with dignity the situation has not improved. Indeed in the last few years the Federal Government has gone to great lengths to suppress information and ideas about voluntary euthanasia for those who are terminally ill. Amendments to the Crimes Act made it illegal to use the telephone, fax, email or internet to share information about end-of-life options.

Slippery slope - The so-called "slippery slope" argument suggests that the introduction of one form of euthanasia (regarded as "acceptable" because of the requirement of consent and the specification of detailed safeguards) will invariably lead to less acceptable forms (e.g. voluntary euthanasia without proper safeguards, or even non-voluntary or involuntary euthanasia). There is no evidence for this in countries where legalised voluntary euthanasia has been introduced.

Palliative care – opponents of voluntary euthanasia argue that more sophisticated pain relief measures and the caring of the hospice movement mean that every death could be a good death. However some people will always be beyond the help of even the best palliative care. Some also argue that allowing patient controlled death will undercut efforts to improve palliative care. Evidence from countries that permit active assistance to die does not support this argument. The vast majority of terminally ill patients in these areas continue to choose palliative care.

Hidden pressures – It is suggested by opponents to voluntary euthanasia that some people might feel pressured to make use of this option in the interests of others (in particular family members) rather than because they themselves wished to die this way. This is an argument for strong safeguards around voluntary euthanasia but not an argument to forbid it.

Sanctity of life – A minority of people believe that life is god-given and should not therefore be terminated by others even on request. While respecting the beliefs of these people, there is no reason their beliefs should restrict the choices of people who do not share them.

Majority support - The vast majority of Australians support the right of a competent terminally ill person to take their own life with medical assistance if they so choose. There is anecdotal evidence that despite the legal risks, some health professionals already assist patients to die, while others ignore their wishes because of fears of being sued or prosecuted. There is also anecdotal evidence that euthanasia is sometimes undertaken at home without medical assistance or by people caring for their loved ones. Media reports have suggested that some Australians are even travelling overseas to take advantage of voluntary euthanasia laws in other countries.