

It's time to make dying with dignity a choice for all Australians



Lately Australians have had health, and choice, and how they interrelate, at the front of our minds. Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic brought these two issues into the public sphere and ignited debate more than any other time in recent memory. Alongside the pandemic-fuelled discussion, Australia's Aged Care system has had a magnifying glass over it by way of Royal Commission, and the recent report has confirmed our worst suspicions. Our aged care is a failed system, where our [elderly citizens have in some circumstances, been left to abuse, neglect and untimely death](#).

Enter perhaps the most socially contentious health choice of all – the right and choice to end one's suffering by voluntary dying. The term 'voluntary' is important as it emphasises the choice of the individual.

Recently on [ABCs QandA program](#), an audience member shared a personal, poignant story that highlighted the limited options to illness-sufferers wanting to end their lives in Australia. Pearlie McNeill's partner had dementia and took her own life rather than face physical and mental deterioration and an uncertain end. She did so without her loved ones present as she lived in a state without access to legal voluntary assisted dying. Pearlie expressed pain and frustration at not being able to be with her loved one to say goodbye at this crucial time. Getting right to the crux of the vexed issue, Pearlie emphatically stated 'we should be able to make a bloody choice if we want to!'

Amidst these personal stories, the backdrop of a pandemic, and the revelations of a horrifically broken aged care system, now is the time to reignite the debate about the choice to end one's life when facing a terminal illness and certain death.

Victoria is currently the only state or territory in Australia where those with a terminal illness have the right to legally end their lives (albeit according to strict conditions) under the Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) legislation. Since the start of January 2020, [224 Victorians have ended their life under the VAD system](#). Of these people, most were suffering from terminal cancer or a neurodegenerative disease. Applicants are screened to assess their decision-making capacity and all applications must be coordinated by a medical professional. Doctors' involvement in the VAD system is optional,

however they must undergo training if coordinating an application for a patient. The dispensing of medications is tightly controlled by a Statewide Pharmacy Service and medications must be returned within two weeks if not used by the applicant (for example if they die of natural causes). These are all necessary procedural safeguards to protect the public and ensure those accessing the system are truly in need of an end-of-life choice due to a terminal illness or disease.

The VAD system has received high interest across the state and family members involved praised the process. For example, the daughter of a 96-year-old man, Peter* who elected to die via the VAD system shared that the opportunity provided their family a chance to say goodbye, within the comfort of their home. Importantly, it was reassuring to Peter that he had control over how his life would end, at a time when his terminal cancer diagnosis provided no hope.

Throughout the rest of Australia, the options for patients are grim. Some of the 'lucky' patients may die in hospital with pain relief and with their loved one's present. However, those residing in residential care (for example with neurogenerative disease) may not face the same comforts and support, as the recent Report into Aged Care exposed. While voluntary assisted dying should not be an alternative to aged care, it should be part of a suite of options that people have when facing their end of life due to illness.

More jurisdictions are beginning to acknowledge and legalise this choice. For example, [Western Australia recently passed voluntary assisted dying legislation](#) which will come into effect in July 2021. Similarly to Victoria, those eligible will be people living with a terminal illness or disease and who have decision-making capacity. New Zealand has also introduced an [End of Life Choice Act](#) which will come into place in November 2021. The Act was voted for in a national referendum, with the majority vote supportive of providing a choice to terminal illness sufferers to legally end their life.

Voluntary assisted dying has been somewhat contentiously viewed, however it is simply offering a dignified choice to those who are already facing a nearing death. Some states have recognised this, however terminally ill people should not have their options limited by the policies of the state or territory they reside in. We should be aiming to apply VAD legislation consistently across the country, so there is equity in the end-of-life choices for all Australians. Dying voluntarily will not be everyone's choice, and it does not need to be. Australians have access to high quality palliative care and acute health services. The option should be there for those who wish to have a choice and control over this ultimate milestone as their end-of-life approaches.

*Name has been changed to anonymise the person.

Meet the Author



Isabella is a Master of Public Health student at University of Queensland with qualifications in BHealthSc (Hons)/BA Deakin University, Melbourne. Isabella currently works for Safer Care Victoria (SCV), an administrative office of the Victorian Department of Health, who oversee quality and safety in Victorian health services. Her work involves reviewing and learning from adverse patient safety events. Isabella is interested in working on programs that focus on improving health outcomes for people living with chronic illness, including avoiding hospitalisations.

Disclosure Statement

- SCV administers the VAD program for Victoria, however Isabella does not work in the program.
- All the information contained in this article is in the public domain.

Reference List

Image 1: The Conversation (“[Articles on Palliative Care](#)”)

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