

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING

419. Mr S.A. MILLMAN to the Minister for Health:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's historic decision to introduce voluntary assisted dying, which, from 1 July last year, has provided eligible terminally ill Western Australians the opportunity to die with dignity. Nearing the one-year anniversary of this significant reform, can the minister update the house on the implementation of voluntary assisted dying, including the partnership between clinicians, patients and their loved ones, and can the minister outline to the house how access to VAD has provided terminally ill Western Australians with peace of mind?

Ms A. SANDERSON replied:

I thank the member for his question. I also thank him for his commitment to this outcome and for serving on the Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices with me, the member for Baldvis and other members of this place and the other place, some of whom are here and some of whom have since retired.

The introduction of assisted dying was the result of our committee recommendations. That was a very challenging but worthwhile process—I think that is the right way to describe it—in which we heard many, many accounts of people who had watched their loved ones unnecessarily suffer a very painful death. One particular account stayed with me and continues to stay with me. That was a young woman named Melanie, who was the same age as me. She had motor neurone disease and had to seek assistance in an aged-care institution. She could not find relief for her symptoms and starved herself to death. This unnecessary suffering across the community was very obvious to the committee; therefore, we made that recommendation.

The legislation itself is important. We are coming to the first anniversary of its operation. Although the bill was passed some time ago in the previous Parliament, the government spent 18 months on implementation to ensure that it was absolutely right, that the safeguards were in place, the process was clear, and that we had the right and safest possible framework. The framework is that the person has to be 18 years old, an Australian citizen and permanent resident, and have a disease, illness and medical condition that is advanced, progressive and will, on the balance of probabilities, cause death within six months, or 12 months if it is a neurodegenerative disease. Importantly, the bill was introduced with significant investment in palliative care, both metropolitan and regional, because we know that there is a continuum of care at end of life. If we are to have genuine end-of-life choices, it needs to be a genuine choice to have palliative care and/or voluntary assisted dying. It is overseen by a board that ensures that the proper processes are adhered to and is able to report back to me.

It is good to report to the house an update on how that process is going and how it is operating. Since the implementation and operationalisation of the act nearly one year ago, 68 health practitioners have completed all elements of the VAD-approved training, with 46 based in Perth, including the Peel area, and the remainder in the rural regions. A total of 171 individuals have accessed voluntary assisted dying to 31 May 2022. The average age was 73 years old, and 58 per cent were male and 42 per cent were female. A total of 65 per cent were diagnosed with cancer-related disease, 15 per cent neuro related, eight per cent respiratory and 11 per cent other. Geographically distributed, 79 per cent were in the metro area and 21 per cent in the regional areas.

I am very proud to be the Minister for Health in the McGowan government and certainly to be part of implementing and introducing this really important framework, as well as the important significant investment in palliative care.