

Submission to the Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices

I make this submission to the Joint Select Committee on End of Life Choices inquiry into the need for laws in Western Australia to allow citizens to make informed choices regarding their own end of life choices.

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Summary

I refer to item (c) of the Terms of Reference which deals with “what type of legislative change may be required”. I oppose any change to legislation which would, in effect, legalise killing (euthanasia) or assisted suicide. I urge the Joint Select Committee to consider the reasons I advance below.

Elder abuse

A recent article in The Weekend Australian newspaper¹ highlighted the rise of cases where family members steal from their elderly relatives or pressure them to give up their assets. It is no stretch of the imagination to suppose that this “inheritance impatience” will extend to pressuring elderly people to “take the easy way out” should euthanasia be legalised. Older people need to be protected from the greed of people who seek to exploit their weakness. Making it easier to get rid of them is not protecting them.

Slippery slope

Some people decry “slippery slope” argument as weak, but in the case of euthanasia it is very pertinent to argue that there is a considerable difference between the situation in which killing is not allowed under any circumstances and situations where cases can be made for killing and the decision to kill or not to kill becomes a matter of persuasion or judgement. I have no confidence in the so-called safeguards that euthanasia advocates propose. History shows that safeguards can be circumvented and inevitably weaken. The safest was to prevent abuse of legalised killing is not to allow it at all.

Why now?

The reason why we have this enthusiasm for euthanasia at this time is not hard to find – it is simply that respect for the sanctity of life is in decline. But in another way, it is quite surprising. Why, when the human race has recourse to better medical care and pain management than at any time in history do so many people find they cannot bear the thought of the pain or discomfort that every person who ever lived has had to endure? It points to a profound loss of the sense that life is worth living. If a person comes to feel that their life is worthless, then that is a tragedy for which we are all to blame. What we should be doing is not helping to put that person out of their misery by killing them, but supporting them physically and psychologically to feel comfortable and valued.

Individual choice

People often argue that it is “my right to do what I like with my life.” I simply disagree. Every person matters, and if they matter at all, they matter to other people. If a person feels that no-one cares for them, then that is an indictment on the people who should care for them. Whatever the reasons, we are all impoverished by the loss of a person we should have cared for.

“Death with dignity”

The cry of “death with dignity” is frequently heard from euthanasia advocates. It is a trick of misdirection, a misuse of the word “dignity”. Dignity is not a description of a person’s external circumstances, it refers to the inner strength to rise above those external circumstance. A person can die in squalor and still have dignity. It is up to others – us - to nurture a person’s dignity on the path to decline and death.

Our obligations as human beings

So I have dismissed the arguments for euthanasia based on individual liberty and a dishonest concept of dignity. The life and death of persons is not just a matter for the individual, it concerns all of our society. It is hard to see any way that society can be better with euthanasia, except that it will save us a lot of money in care for the elderly and dying. We can be sure that allowing euthanasia will unleash viscousness and selfishness under the guise of caring, and that will hardly be good for our society. We all have an obligation as human beings to care for others and we should be emphasising that obligation. We have laws protecting life to shield us from the baser side of human nature. This is no time to lessen that protection.

ⁱ *‘Loved ones’ pose biggest threat to old people’s assets – Elder abuse to exact financial gain is sadly on the rise*, Caroline Overington in The Weekend Australian, September 9-10, 2017, Inquirer page 17.