

FOUR IN 10 DOCTORS WANT VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA, AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION SURVEY SHOWS

By Julia Medlow

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A majority of doctors support the profession being involved in assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia if laws are changed to allow it, a survey by the Australian Medical Association has found.

Despite the support, the AMA has stopped short of backing calls for new laws, and says doctors should not be actively helping people die in its latest position statement on the fraught issue.



President of the AMA Dr Michael Gannon said 4000 doctors responded to a survey about their views on assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia. Photo: Bohdan Warchomij

President of the AMA Michael Gannon said 4000 members responded to a survey about their views on assisted suicide and voluntary euthanasia recently.

He said 50 per cent said doctors should not be involved in euthanasia or physician assisted suicide, 38 per cent said they should be and 12 per cent neither agreed or disagreed.

Dr Gannon said while most respondents said they did not personally want to provide euthanasia or assist a suicide, the majority said doctors should be the ones to do this work.

"People (doctors) see this clearly as a type of medical care if it was legal," he said.

A spokesman for the AMA said it would not release the survey until it has been shared with members.

The AMA's position statement says doctors "have an ethical duty to care for dying patients so that death is allowed to occur in comfort and with dignity".

But it said doctors should not be involved in interventions that have as their primary intention the ending of a person's life. This does not include the discontinuation of treatments that are of no medical benefit to a dying patient.

The position statement emphasised that the following practices are not voluntary euthanasia or assisted suicide:

- not initiating life-prolonging measures
- not continuing life-prolonging measures
- the administration of treatment or other action intended to relieve symptoms which may have a secondary consequence of hastening death

Unlike previous AMA position statements on end of life care, the one released on Thursday says there are "divergent views within the medical profession and the broader community in relation to euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide".

"The AMA acknowledges that laws in relation to euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide are ultimately a matter for society and government," it said.

If governments decide that laws should be changed to allow for the practice of euthanasia and/or physician assisted suicide, the position statement said the medical profession must be involved in the development of relevant legislation, regulations and guidelines.

The AMA said those laws and regulations must "protect all doctors acting within the law; vulnerable patients – such as those who may be coerced or be susceptible to undue influence, or those who may consider themselves to be a burden to their families, carers or society; patients and doctors who do not want to participate; and the functioning of the health system as a whole".

The group said any change to the laws in relation to euthanasia and/or physician-assisted suicide must never compromise the provision and resourcing of end of life care and palliative care services.

In June, a parliamentary inquiry in Victoria recommended voluntary euthanasia be made available to some terminally ill people. The state government is due to respond soon.

- *A previous version of this story said more than 50 per cent of survey respondents did not support voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide; more than 30 per cent did support it, and the remaining were undecided. These figures were incorrect.*