

Assisted dying: How family tragedy changed Daniel Andrews and Jaala Pulford



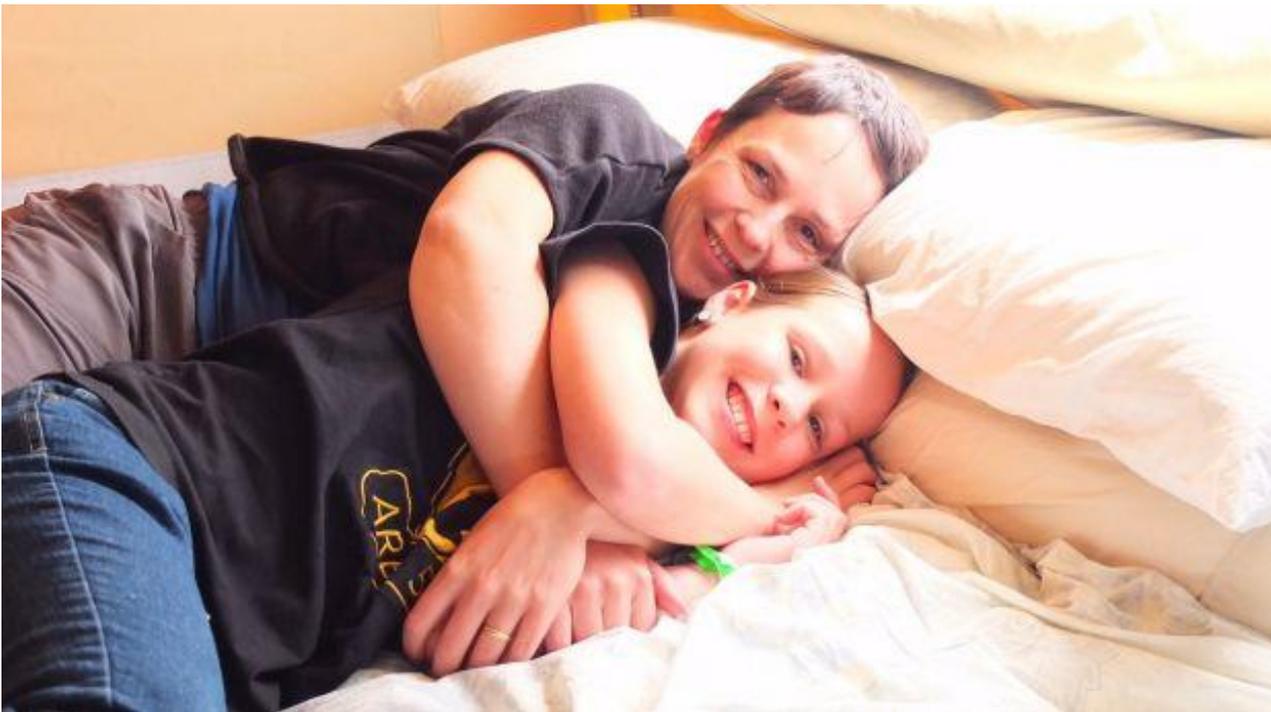
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There are few things that shape your world view like watching someone you love die in pain.

For Daniel Andrews, the turning point came in the lead up to April 24 this year: the Sunday when his father, Bob, drew his last breath after a lengthy and agonising battle with cancer.



Jaala Pulford with her daughter Sinead. Sinead died two years ago at the age of 13. Photo: Supplied

But Bob was gone long before then, Andrews revealed this week, withering away until he became a shadow of the "big person" his family had always known.

"As his quality of life deteriorated and as I realised that he'd passed away from us long before he died – I knew our laws needed to change," he told *The Sunday Age*.



Daniel Andrews on election night in 2014 with his father Bob. Photo: Eddie Jim

This week's announcement that proposed laws will be introduced in the Victorian Parliament next year helping terminally ill people to die was a significant shift for a Catholic Premier, who only 18 months ago declared he was not prepared to make such a change.

Andrews' resistance was not based on faith, he explained, but from his stint as health minister under the Brumby government. It was during that time the Labor MP saw firsthand the incessant demand for hospital beds in an overstretched system and became increasingly concerned that "these laws might see a rationing of precious health dollars".

But Thursday's announcement was also significant for the cabinet as a whole – the culmination of lengthy conversations between ministers, subtle lobbying on all sides of the debate, and the private contemplation of a vexed question: should people in irreversible decline have the right to choose the timing and manner of their death?

It was a question posed at Spring Street eight years ago, when Greens MP Colleen Hartland introduced a private member's bill for physician-assisted dying that was ultimately defeated in the upper house 25 votes to 13.



Health Minister Jill Hennessy holds a photo of her mother who has MS. Photo: Pat Scala

But back then, only one Labor MP voted in favour of the bill: Andrews' right-hand man Gavin Jennings. This time more than half the cabinet have already declared support, along with a several Labor backbenchers, a growing number of Liberal MPs, the Greens and the Sex Party.

Crucially, in June this year Parliament's legal and social issues committee tabled its landmark report into end-of-life choices, setting out a broad, evidence-based framework on which to base the assisted-dying bill.

What's more, under parliamentary rules, cabinet had exactly six months to respond to the report, forcing MPs to turn their attention to the issue whether they wanted to or not. Health Minister Jill Hennessy was the first to seize the opportunity.

Hennessy was only three years old when her mother Joan was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Decades later, Joan's decline is irreversible, but she's legally unable to take control of her own death. "She has to literally wither away until an infection takes her, or she chokes, or pneumonia comes by virtue of her body breaking down internally," the minister recently told *The Sunday Age*. "It's unbearable to think that will be the end of her life."

When the committee tabled its report, Hennessy knew there would only be so long that she could duck the media's questions about euthanasia with a phoney answer about having an "open mind" to reform. In the end it was Andrews who suggested that perhaps she didn't need to, effectively giving her the freedom to publicly declare her position. And on Tuesday, September 13, she did.

"Personally – and I believe personal experience plays a strong role in informing people's views on this issue – I support euthanasia," she told Fairfax Media.

It's no coincidence that the next day seven of Hennessy's cabinet colleagues followed suit, with Tim Pallas, Jaala Pulford, Martin Pakula, Richard Wynne, Lily D'Ambrosio, Steve Herbert, and Lisa Neville all backing reform. And by Thursday another three ministers declared their support: Fiona Richardson, Natalie Hutchins and Philip Dalidakis. Suddenly, the momentum was building.

Some, like Jennings, had been long-time supporters of voluntary euthanasia – in fact, it was Jennings himself who introduced the motion that set up the end-of-life choices inquiry last year, after several discussions with the Greens and the Sex Party, who were desperate to push the issue along. Others, like Pakula, voted against the 2008 bill because he didn't feel there were enough appropriate safeguards, but as Attorney-General would now have a direct role preparing the legislation.

And then are some MPs, like Agriculture Minister Pulford, who know more about death than any parent should. During a teary moment in her office after the government's announcement this week, Pulford informed *The Sunday Age* that Monday will mark exactly two years to the day that her daughter Sinead died of cancer, aged 13.

She opened up about how Sinead went "from being fit as a fiddle, to a diagnosis that was diabolical". She remembered, too, the emergency admissions, the

chemotherapy, and being thrust into a carer's role "that you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy". And she recalled the moment the doctor told her Sinead only had a few days left – and how her assertive little girl was "absolutely adamant" that she would spend those last days at home, with the cat on the edge of the bed, her favourite music, and friends and family by her side.

"What I observed was my daughter on an inevitable journey to her death but in control of her environment," Pulford said.

When the government brings its bill to Parliament, only terminally ill adults with decision-making capacity in their final stages of life will have the right to assisted suicide. This is appropriate, the minister said, before adding: "You can't run away and hide from death. So if the Parliament does decide to make this change - even if a very small number of people can have a slightly better death - then it is a reform worth making."

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/assisted-dying-reforms-how-death-changed-daniel-andrews-and-jaala-pulford-20161210-gt8cma.html>