

SYDNEY MORNING HERALD COMMENT

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• They said my dad wouldn't suffer as he died, but he did

BY Sarah Edelman

In 2012 my father was diagnosed with end stage stomach cancer. He was scared of the process of dying, but the people from palliative care reassured him that he would not suffer. But he did suffer. Although he was in one of the best palliative care facilities in Melbourne, dying was a slow, cruel process. Whilst he was not previously interested in euthanasia, he asked the doctor on several occasions to help him die. Like many family members who have stood by helplessly, I still feel guilty that I could not help him.

Since that time three more bills seeking to legalise assisted dying (in NSW, Tasmania and South Australia) have been rejected by state parliaments. To hear politicians blithely debating euthanasia laws is particularly galling, having experienced the painful end of this process.

During 2017, a bill to allow assisted dying for individuals with a terminal illness who face unrelievable suffering will be put before the NSW Parliament. There have been more than 30 Voluntary Assisted Dying bills tabled in various states, and all have been voted down. Why?

The NSW premier and the leader of the Opposition are on record saying that they will be voting against such a bill. Likewise, many other state MPs have already made up their minds. When Dying with Dignity NSW conducted a survey of NSW MPs prior to the 2015 election, only 22 per cent stated that they in principle support legislation that allows voluntary assisted dying. What is going on when proposed laws known to be supported by at least 75 per cent of the electorate, are being consistently rejected by our elected representatives?



Sarah Edelman with her father Max three weeks before he died. Photo: supplied

Our state and federal parliaments comprise a large proportion of MPs with strong religious beliefs, relative to the general population. This affects the way they vote on social policy issues, such as marriage equality, funding of school chaplains, abortion law reform, the safe schools program, enrolment to ethics classes in NSW schools and, of course, voluntary assisted dying. In concert with religious lobby groups, such as the Australian Christian Lobby and Right to Life, they work to defeat proposed laws that are not consistent with their view of Christian theology.

On many issues, these MP are out of step even with the majority of Australian Christians. A 2012 Newspoll survey showed that 88 per cent of Anglicans and 77 per cent of Catholics agreed that a doctor should be allowed to meet a request from a hopelessly ill patient for help to die. A group called "Christians Supporting Choice for Voluntary Euthanasia" are among the strongest advocates. They argue that a demonstration of Christian love and compassion for those with terminal or hopeless illness includes the option of a pain-free, peaceful and dignified death.

Meanwhile opponents of proposed laws are running dishonest campaigns, sowing fear, uncertainty and doubt. Their claim that adequate safeguards are impossible to achieve has been challenged by the 2016 report of the Victorian Committee for End-of-Life Choices, whose members travelled overseas to investigate how these laws work in countries where they have operated for more than 20 years. They found robust regulatory frameworks, rigorous safeguards and strict monitoring procedures. After interviewing doctors, palliative care specialists, disability group advocates, legal experts and opponents to the laws, they found no evidence of abuse.

As a humane and liberal society Australians care for the vulnerable. We know that for a small minority there is little that can be done to relieve their suffering, even with optimal care. Legalisation of voluntary assisted dying would give these individuals another option. The laws would be used here as they are used overseas, as an option of last resort, decided upon by the patient in consultation with their doctors when all other treatments have failed.

In addition, for those of us who will be diagnosed with a progressive terminal illness, the mere knowledge that we will have choice regarding the manner and timing of our death will provide enormous comfort and relief from anxiety. Whether or not we ultimately choose to exercise that right, the psychological benefits will be substantial.

Members of Parliament who ignore the wishes of the vast majority of Australians do so at their peril. The Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump, the rise of small populist parties like One Nation and the growing number of crossbenchers being elected to our Senate should remind MPs that Australians don't want to be taken for mugs. If our elected MPs continue to ignore our wishes, we will look for alternatives.

Dr Sarah Edelman is a clinical psychologist, author and president of Dying with Dignity NSW.

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