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## Euthanasia survey hints at support from doctors, nurses and division

**James Robertson**

Most NSW doctors and nurses support a controversial medical euthanasia bill headed for Parliament, according to research that could prompt new debate about the medical fraternity's willingness to accept changes to assisted suicide laws.

A bill, to allow patients to apply for medically assisted euthanasia in specific circumstances when older than 25 (an age when informed consent is deemed reached), will be introduced to the NSW upper house in August for a conscience vote.



Dr Anne Jaumees, an anaesthetist based in western Sydney. A poll of doctors and nurses into what they think about euthanasia has just been conducted. Photo: Dominic Lorrimer

About 60 per cent of doctors support the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill and fewer than 30 per cent oppose it, according to a survey by market research company Ekas emailed to a database of 4000 NSW doctors it deemed "opinion leaders" and returned by about 500.

A smaller sample of about 100 nurses had support running at 80 per cent in favour of the law reform and opposition at fewer than 10 per cent.

A crowd-funding campaign for Annie Gabrielides, a motor neurone disease sufferer who has progressively lost her ability to speak and is a euthanasia advocate, paid for the research.

"I'm consistently hearing from doctors and medical experts expressing their sincere support of my campaign, but they're reluctant to speak out," she said.

The results suggest the medical profession and its famously powerful unions, not just Parliament, will be divided when debate on the bill kicks off.

The Australian Medical Association, which opposes changes to euthanasia law, warned the research could overstate doctors' support.

"It is likely that doctors with more strongly held opinions are responding to these surveys so caution must be used," AMA NSW president Brad Frankum said.

A national AMA poll of 4000 doctors last year found 50 per cent of doctors believed medical professionals should not be involved in assisted suicide, a spokesman emphasised.

But only slightly less than four in ten said they should, according to a news report. Combined with 12 per cent who neither agreed nor disagreed that left physicians close to evenly split in some respects.

And an *Australian Doctor* poll of about 370 medicos last year found about 65 per cent of doctors supported a change to the law on physician-assisted suicide if strict conditions, such as patients nearing the end of their lives and suffering "intolerable pain", some of which are mirrored in the NSW proposal, were met. About half told the journal they would be willing to help perform a procedure.

NSW Nurses and Midwives Association general secretary Brett Holmes said: "The vast majority of nurses support change that enables medically assisted dying. Nurses know patients often choose more drastic means [to medically ending their life] in fear they cannot choose later."

A parliamentary report cited polls from the '90s that found nurses' support for euthanasia reform reached as high as about 75 per cent.

A dozen polls in the past decade had found between 75 to 80 per cent of Australians backed medically assisted euthanasia.

Western Sydney anaesthetist Anne Jaumees does too after working in palliative care for 15 years: "All their lives they want dignity and patients want that up until the end, too."

The bill is the product of cross-party collaboration and will only allow for applications from patients expected to die within the coming year and experiencing extreme pain, suffering or incapacitation.

Safeguards proposed included allowing relatives to challenge applications in the Supreme Court, assessments by independent doctors and being subject to a 48-hour cooling-off period.

But Maria Cigolioni said, while proponents argued the bill came laden with safeguards, it required no review of what palliative care patients had first sought before applying to end their lives or for alternatives to be suggested.

Overseas safeguards had been loosened so euthanasia could be applied for by people also suffering from psychosocial problems, Dr Cigolioni said.

"Instead of spending money on euthanasia reforms, we should be investing in psychosocial support programs to address suffering."

"People [will hasten the solution of death] when so many other things need to be looked at as the potential cause of that suffering," she said. "Once you change a criminal law [to allow] people to be killed, then [its conditions] can be extended beyond just being terminally ill, [and expand to include] the disabled and the aged and children, as it has in the Netherlands and Belgium."

The state budget last week announced a \$100 million increase in funding for palliative care, something experts said would bring levels of NSW services into line with other states.

AMA policy recognises a divergence in doctors' views on euthanasia but it states doctors should not be involved in dispensing treatment that shortens a patient's life.

<http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/euthanasia-survey-draws-out-ethical-debate-among-doctors-and-nurses-20170624-gwxspn.html?csp=394107df0827d2678a8c771bd96b793a>