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MEDIA RELEASE

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Nurses union calls on Victorian Parliament to vote for voluntary assisted dying law

Voluntary assisted dying law will give terminally ill patients more access to palliative care options, further specialised review of treatment options and more autonomy around managing intolerable pain and increase their legal protections and oversight.

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (Victorian Branch) Secretary Lisa Fitzpatrick said 'We have enormous respect for Premier Daniel Andrews and Health Minister Jill Hennessy for their courageous and thorough work proposing this compassionate and safe voluntary assisted dying bill.

'Those who have worked on this bill have approached a difficult ethical issue with intelligence and empathy.

'Every shift nurses are with patients when they die. Our intimate knowledge of the dying process means many nurses are uncomfortable with the status quo and the absence of a legal framework around refusal or stopping of treatment, withdrawing nutrition and hydration, pushing futile treatments that prolong suffering, continuous sedation and administering increasingly high doses of morphine.'

'The proposed bill will give dying Victorians more choice and control about their last days and hours, but it will also give them greater protection over decisions that shorten their lives that are already being made by others without consultation or oversight,' she said.

'There are no figures on the number of Victorians who died from an increased dose of morphine administered to manage pain, nor is this information on death certificates – the grey status quo is not good enough.'

Ms Fitzpatrick said that while many were calling for improved palliative care one of the leaders in the sector, Caritas Christi Hospice, was proposing to close six beds. The St Vincent's Health Australia facility in Kew has reported a decline in doctors referring palliative care patients since October 2016.

'Vague calls for palliative care improvements lack sincerity when they fail to identify the specific deficits in our current services or detail the changes required to be more responsive to dying Victorian's needs in hospital and community settings,' she said.

ANMF has been working to increase the number of nurses caring for patients of public palliative care services. The speciality area's legislated ratios are one nurse to four patients on the morning shift, plus a nurse in charge; one nurse to five patients on the afternoon shift, plus a nurse in charge and one nurse to eight patients on the night shift.

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Health Minister Jill Hennessy's ratio improvement taskforce is currently considering ANMF's claims for one nurse to four patients on the afternoon shift and one nurse to six patients on the night shift, plus a nurse in charge.

'It's not an either/or scenario, ANMF wants a system that leads the world in hospital and community palliative care nursing and provides a robust, safe and a compassionate voluntary assisted dying choice if you are terminally ill and meet very tight criteria,' Ms Fitzpatrick said.

'Many doctors who specifically care for terminally ill patients – general practitioners and oncologists – acknowledge that despite their best palliative care efforts and the best pharmacological efforts unspeakable suffering can't always be relieved,' she said.

'Experiencing unmanageable pain and symptoms is horrific for the person dying. It's devastating for those witnessing such a death and changes them forever.

'Nurses are standing up for those patients who are too ill to lobby politicians for this law and for those we have cared for and, despite our best efforts, did not have a good death,' she said.

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