

## VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

*Legislative Assembly Second Reading Debate – copied from Hansard 25 November 2021*

**Mr STUART AYRES (Penrith—Minister for Jobs, Investment, Tourism and Western Sydney, and Minister for Industry and Trade) (11:32):** I contribute to debate on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. First and foremost, I thank all the people across the community and the State who contacted me in many forms to give me their views and information. I put on record that I recognise the diversity of views on this particular matter. For some people, it is a hardened view—no matter what any individual in this Chamber says during the debate, we will not change their views. It is perfectly reasonable in a democracy for people from a position of faith to be unwaveringly committed to their views. Fundamental principles have guided me through and helped me to reconcile how I will vote on the bill.

I start with the basic principles of care, love and compassion. If I focus on those principles, the bill provides the most amount of care and love to a person. I contemplate the principle of compassion when someone is coming to the end of their life. Another point that I have reconciled in my mind is that voluntary assisted dying is not suicide. That is particularly important. If a person is already dying from a painful illness, they are already being killed and they already know that. That is a significant point of difference from a person who takes their own life for a raft of other reasons—and I do not wish to make a judgement on that. But there is a clear, cogent point of difference. That is another foundation stone. I make a very clear distinction between the concept of suicide and voluntary assisted dying.

I also want the concept of voluntary assisted dying to be legal and rare, though I do not wish that choice on anyone. In fact, I would love if medical science could remove these terminal illnesses so that the bill I will support today is not used as frequently as it must be. But I also want voluntary assisted dying to be legal. I want a legal framework to govern that process because the principle of that legal framework protects vulnerable people; it ensures that people who are not in a position to make a cogent and clear decision about the end of their lives are protected. I commend the drafters of both the bill and the amendments that have been put forward. The drafters have ensured that as the law moves through the Chamber it provides appropriate protections for vulnerable people as well as appropriate guidance for medical professionals who must engage in an exercise that I cannot even contemplate.

The bill strikes the right balance. It provides the legal framework to ensure that people can make the decision to end their lives and it provides strict safeguards to ensure that vulnerable people are protected. I also recognise the importance of palliative care. We must support people through the end of their lives. The bill will allow us to enact through law an immensely rare provision. To support people through appropriate palliative care is to recognise the fundamental way in which our community recognises the concepts of care, love and compassion. We must do better in that area in New South Wales. In fact, I think the debate has brought that forward in an incredibly positive way. I have no doubt that off the back of debate on the bill many representatives across the Chamber and across our communities will talk more proactively about how palliative care can be used more effectively in our health system.

One other concept that I have thought about as I have gone through my decision-making process is that of religion, which is brought up quite regularly. As a Catholic, I must reconcile my position. Perhaps there is a slight irony in how I have arrived at supporting the bill. My views on care, love and compassion come largely from two areas: my family and my education. I was educated at a Catholic school—Christian Brothers. I am immensely grateful that my education provided me with two skills, which I will outline in a moment. I went to a Christian Brothers school in western Sydney at Kingswood and at Emu Plains. On top of the love, care and compassion that was embedded in my childhood as I grew up, became an adult and found my place in the world, my education also ensured that I had critical thinking and pragmatism—maybe that was the Christian Brothers influence.

I would like to think—and perhaps for this I must seek forgiveness—that that environment allowed me to support the bill. But for all of the people who have participated in debate on the bill, regardless of how they vote, all members recognise that this is fundamentally about how we care for people and how we use compassion to support people through the end of their lives. Fundamentally, it is about love. If we can remove pain that is completely out of someone's control, I think that is the pragmatic and appropriate thing to do.

Not everyone will agree with these views—not everyone in my community will agree with these views—but that is the nature of democracy. I thank all of those who brought this bill before the Parliament, the co-signatories and everyone who has been engaged in the immensely respectful debate that we have participated in. I have concluded that the most appropriate way forward is to allow voluntary assisted dying to occur in New South Wales. It is an appropriate way to care for people at the end of their life. It is an expression of love and support given with a compassionate heart. Fundamentally, if we walk down this path my view is that it should be legal and it should be rare.