

## VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

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

**Mr CLAYTON BARR (Cessnock) (11:24):** From the outset I state that I am committed to supporting the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021 and have the support of my community in doing so. By and large I have listened intently and respectfully to the very small number of people in my community who have spoken to me about not supporting the bill, and to the contributions of members of Parliament who will not support the bill so that I can understand their views. It seems almost unanimously that their opposition is founded in their faith and religious belief. I say good on them and all power to them for having that. However, if I am to interpret what I am hearing, one of the themes is the sense that the ultimate death of a person needs to come as a natural step in our journey on this earth.

I am not sure what is natural anymore. I am not sure where our medical interventions have become completely unnatural. Neanderthals walked this earth with a lifespan of 27 years. Millions of women and infants died in childbirth, but we rectified that with medical intervention. We have wonderful vaccines that keep us alive. We have cancer treatments that keep us alive when, in reality, a natural course for us would have been a much earlier expiry. Some 35 years ago I had a surfboard fin sever my femoral vein and artery. I should have bled out on the beach that day, but medical intervention saved me. In that sense, the last 35 years of my life have been completely unnatural. If my journey had taken a natural path, I would be dead; I would not be in this Chamber pestering members. There is nothing natural about our existence anymore.

I have had this conversation with people in my community and I asked them to clarify what is natural about their journey through life, given the insistence of some that their beliefs require them to go to a natural death when their time is due. With the wonderful medical interventions we have at our fingertips there is nothing natural about the journey through life for any of us anymore. If we are willing to flex the incredible talent that we have in our medical profession—or, for that matter, our work health safety legislation that keeps people safe. We no longer let roofs fall in on coalminers. We wear seatbelts in cars. There are so many points at which we now intervene. Our entire existence is surrounded by shelters and technologies around automobiles, telehealth and all that sort of stuff. They are completely manmade, constructed realities of our everyday life.

I was raised a Christian who went to Sunday school and attended a Marist Brothers high school. If we believe in the *Bible* and our path through life—and the fact that one day our God will call us to be beside him—then we extend a belief that someone is controlling that journey and there is a natural course for us. Guess what? We as human beings have done amazing things that have completely altered all of those paths. I urge those members who plan to vote to oppose the bill to ponder what is a natural course in our lives now, and whether or not any of us actually lives a natural course. Is there anything we could ever contemplate as a natural death? It is all a construction and we make choices about the construction of our existence. This bill is giving us a voluntary, constructed choice about our expiry.

Here is another constructive choice. Today on my way into Parliament I passed some people who were exercising their democratic ability to express their views. They had shirts on that stated "Care does not kill" or something like that.

Meanwhile, they had an upper House inquiry into the delivery of health care in regional areas. If care does not kill but we know there are processes in our healthcare system that do, does that mean we interpret those healthcare processes as lacking in care? Even in the Hunter, patients die in the back of ambulances because beds are not available—and the Hunter Valley is not some far-flung regional or remote community. So if the collective decisions of governments about where they spend money on hospitals and how they roll out health care across the State leads to people dying in regional communities, though they may not have died had they lived in the city, does that mean we do not care? Does that mean we construct a budget reality, through the expenditure of the money of this State, that is uncaring? Do we make a conscious choice to kill because of a budget construction? I do not accept that.

Yes, there are inadequacies in regional communities. No, we do not have the same access to healthcare facilities. Yes, people in regional communities choose to die instead of pursuing treatment that would take them away from their family, loved ones, culture and country. That is a reality and it happens every single day. But that is not to say the Parliament does not care. However, certainly the decisions that are made in this Parliament kill—yes, they do. These days we have anything other than a natural course or pathway through our lives. People

should be able to choose the construction of their own end. We have heard a lot of heartfelt stories in this House about exactly why that is the case, and I commend members for their sincere and heartfelt contributions.

I also commend the co-sponsors of the legislation, who several months ago forewarned members of Parliament about the introduction of the bill and gave us time to consult with our community. The member for Tamworth said he spent months doing that, as did many other members. Sometimes legislation is dumped in the House without time for consultation. On this occasion, no member can say they did not have time to consult with their communities. The best possible politics for this State and for the people of this State is when we have time to talk. I commend all the co-sponsors for flagging the bill's content with us and for giving us fair warning of its introduction. There is nothing natural about our journeys through life. I urge those who seek to oppose the bill on the basis that they want us to meet a natural death to reflect on that because it does not happen for any of us any more. I support the bill emphatically.