

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

Legislative Assembly Second Reading Debate – copied from Hansard 19 November 2021

Ms PRUE CAR (Londonderry) (12:56): I make a contribution to debate on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. I quote the words of Sharon, who lives in Jordan Springs in my electorate. She said:

My best friend died from cancer, not peacefully in her bed, like the common fairytale that is used to soften the reality, but drugged to the hilt because of fear and pain. Why do we have to suffer so? I remember her as I have described above. All my good memories were stolen in her last hours. It is not fair to the dying, it is not fair to the living, everybody suffers. Let us say our goodbyes with dignity and love, not voiceless and to the sound of a respirator.

I will attempt to explain my position on this important legislation to my constituents in the electorate of Londonderry. I make a pretty brief contribution to what I think may be the most significant piece of legislation that certainly I have seen come before this place and that we may see in this Parliament because of the gravity of the issue we are talking about. The contributions by many members have revealed the emotion that it brings out in all of us because we are confronting our own mortality and the mortality of those we love when we debate and vote on this very significant legislation.

I believe the bill is well overdue. As I have said publicly to my community, I am proud to support the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. I thank the members of the community I represent who contacted me about this issue, those who asked me to support the bill and those who asked me not to support the bill. Like every decision that I have taken in a job that has been entrusted to me by the people of Londonderry, I have taken this one very seriously. The purpose of my contribution today is to explain my decision to my community. Like other members in this place who have spoken before me and those who will speak after me, I too have personal experience that I bring to this issue—personal experience of loss, of incurable illness, of palliative care, and of the rupturing impact that those illnesses have on families and generations.

My partner is a nurse and frontline worker who has lost both of his parents. He has palliated hundreds and hundreds of patients; he has seen it on the front line. But I support the bill not because of my own personal experiences or those of my family, as significant as they are to the formation of my views; the reason I support the bill, and I support it strongly, is because of my community. On a matter on which my political party has afforded me a conscience vote, I cannot, hand on heart, say that I had a chance to give just one person in my community the freedom to choose dignity in death and yet I did not. From my privileged position in the Parliament of New South Wales, I cannot, hand on heart, say that I had a chance to change the law—to allow even one person in the community that I represent the choice of a dignified ending—but I did not. I cannot say that I had the opportunity to give people the freedom of a better quality of death and yet I did not.

Like many members in this place, my own views about the world have been informed by my upbringing. Many members have spoken about their religious upbringing; in my case, I was brought up a Catholic. That has helped to inform many of my personal views and my approach to the world—an approach to the world that shows compassion for others. I cannot think of anything more compassionate than this. I have heard hundreds of stories from members of my community who have watched their loved ones suffer at the end of their life. The people who choose voluntary assisted dying should have the freedom to choose dignity in death. I do not mean to simplify this very emotive and difficult issue but, in contemplating it, I keep coming back to one word in the title of the bill—voluntary. Nothing in this piece of legislation will make anyone have to go through assisted dying; it will just give people the choice. People will have the freedom to choose. That is why I am comfortable supporting the bill.

We all agree that we need more support and funding for palliative care. I do not think palliative care funding and voluntary assisted dying are mutually exclusive. Not one member of the Chamber would think we do not need more support and pain relief for people at the end of their life, and voluntary assisted dying does not mean that we cannot increase funding for palliative care. Of course we should increase funding for palliative care. No-one will die because of the legislation; people will have the choice to die in their own way, free from pain, because of this important, landmark piece of law. I am comfortable that the bill has the appropriate safeguards to prevent coercion. The bill will only apply to people who are already at the very end of their life. If the legislation passes, the people who have the choice to access voluntary assisted dying are already at the very end stages of their lives.

I thank the member for Sydney for introducing the bill to the Parliament and also all the people who have advocated for this before us—people like Andrew Denton, who has advocated for it in the public space for many years. I note with considerable regret that New South Wales is the last State to enact voluntary assisted dying legislation, which does not make me happy. But I hope the Parliament passes this important bill so that people in my community, and in all our communities, have the choice of assisted dying if they want it. We will not make anyone take this option. It is a choice; it is voluntary. When my time is done here in this incredible position as a representative of the people of my electorate, if I have in some way helped one person to choose a dignified death, a better quality death, I will be comfortable knowing that. I cannot think of anything more compassionate than that. I am very proud of my position on the bill, and I hope it passes. I hope the people of New South Wales have freedom of choice and compassion and dignity in death.