

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

Legislative Assembly Second Reading Debate – copied from Hansard 12 November 2021

Mrs HELEN DALTON (Murray) (15:49): I speak in support of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. I thank the member for Sydney for not only his passionate advocacy on the bill but also his careful and conscientious work, listening to voices from across New South Wales. I also thank him for inviting me to co-sponsor this bill, of which I am proud to offer my support. Today we heard the Premier speak strongly against the bill. Mr Perrottet said, "The answer to suffering is to not offer death, but care, comfort and compassion". That is just rank hypocrisy. Tell me, when has the Perrottet Government ever offered care, comfort and compassion to those suffering in our society? Just this week, I have been told Griffith cancer patients are having to wait up to eight weeks for lifesaving cancer treatment. The reason? The New South Wales Government has refused to fund extra cancer clinics at Griffith Base Hospital. Doctors and nurses begged for this funding; the Government said no. As a result, suffering cancer patients have to get in their car and drive three hours to Albury for treatment. The Government is putting their lives at risk to save a few bucks.

If only this Premier fought as hard for those sick people trying to stay alive as he does to stop voluntary assisted dying. The idea that voluntary assisted dying is a slippery slope that leads us to devaluing of life is just plain wrong, because the Government has been sliding us down that slope for years. Just look at the treatment of those in aged care, of children in State Government foster care, and of Indigenous people in Far West New South Wales, where life expectancy is as low as 37 in some towns. That is a disgrace. The sanctity of life of those groups does not seem to matter to the Government. The suicide rate in the Murrumbidgee region has gone up 59 per cent since the Government was elected in 2011. I have appealed consistently for more funding and mental health services to reverse that trend. But the New South Wales Government says it cannot afford it. People in hospitals across rural New South Wales are begging the Government for care and compassion. The Government is refusing to listen. But, for some reason, the Premier wants to fight to force people who are terminally ill to stay alive.

Despite the hypocrisy, I do not to pretend that voluntary assisted dying is an easy decision. I am sure all of my fellow members have received as many passionate letters and phone calls, as I have, in favour and against this bill. I acknowledge that both sides of the debate and the members who present them here are well reasoned and legitimate. On the one hand, legalising assisted dying will put us in line with other Australian States and with the forward-moving jurisdictions across the world in offering terminally ill people the freedom to die on their own terms and to minimise unbearable, incurable suffering. On the other hand, I understand that the very concept of assisted dying goes against some of our culture's most deeply held instincts to preserve life at all costs. For many months now, I have listened closely to the arguments from both sides. I have spoken to the people from all age groups and backgrounds across my electorate. I see both the merit and the concerns on both sides, but ultimately two things have convinced me that supporting the bill is the right thing to do.

Firstly, it is clear that well over three-quarters of my constituents support voluntary assisted dying. As their elected representative, it is my first duty to express their will in this place. Secondly, I have assured the minority of my constituents who are against voluntary assisted dying that I would not support any bill that did not contain the strongest possible safeguards. I am confident that the bill before us today does just that. Many have worried that this bill is about "giving up" on people. We have often heard the phrase, "Where there is life, there is hope." But the safeguards in the bill are designed to ensure that it will never be used where there is still hope of a cure. It is a hard thing to admit that sometimes there is no hope. We are an optimistic people. The passions aroused by the bill, I believe, come because it confronts us with our own mortality. It is hard to accept that despite the best care, despite the strongest will in the world, sometimes there is nothing more that can be done. But if it is hard for us to admit that here, and in the abstract, I cannot imagine how hard it must be to hear it as a patient. And in those cases, I believe we owe it to the patient to give them the freedom to choose their final days.

The most legitimate worry I have heard about voluntary assisted dying, expressed by many of my rural constituents, is that it will be seen as a replacement for palliative care; that, like so many other services we lack in the bush, we will not really have a choice; that dying will be seen as the cheaper or easier option. But high-quality palliative care and voluntary assisted dying are not mutually exclusive. Many of those opposed to

the bill also have the power to properly fund and improve palliative care across our State. However this House votes and whatever it resolves, I ask all members here to commit to closing the gap on rural health services, especially in palliative care. If those improvements are made in conjunction with the bill, then all people of this State will have the right and the ability to live and die on their own terms. I commend the bill to the House.