

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

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

Mr CHRISTOPHER GULAPTIS (Clarence) (15:37): I make a contribution to debate on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021 knowing that it is contentious, emotional and polarising. However, it is important to speak up about it. Members cannot hide in the shadows thinking someone else will deal with the problem. It is our responsibility and we have an obligation to have a respectful debate. There is no better time than now to deal with the issue, given that we have seen legislation that is working in accordance with the good intentions that have framed this bill adopted in other jurisdictions. I thank the member for Sydney, Mr Alex Greenwich, for his courage and tenacity in bringing this bill forward. I acknowledge the respectful way that he has handled this controversial debate. It is a sensitive topic and he has treated it that way—always engaging with everyone, not just members of this House. He has always been courteous, has listened to opposing viewpoints and, more importantly, has shared information. I thank Alex, the other co-sponsors of the bill and everyone else who has had the resolve to bring the bill to the House.

Life is precious; that is not in doubt. We know how precious life is when it is snuffed out suddenly or is hanging by a thread, and when a loved one is snatched away from us for no good reason and we grieve for our loss. We mourn, we think of all the good times we have had and how we will miss the conversation, the laughter, the tears, the dependency and the companionship. We miss spending our tomorrows with them and mourn a future that they will not be a part of. Life is precious, but the people whom the bill is aimed at do not live a life as most of us do.

They do not wake up in the morning thinking, "What a great day this is going to be. What a joy it is to be alive." They are not thinking about coffee or beer with mates, they are not excited about connecting with family or friends and they are not interested in work or a hobby—quite the contrary. They wake up every day in pain that is so intense even the strongest of painkillers fails to dull the pain. The side effects rob them of their appetite. It makes them drowsy, fogs their mind, slows their reflexes and constipates them. That is how they feel every day, and they have to be bombed out on sleeping pills to make them sleep so that they can wake up the next day and go through the same thing, day in and day out.

That is not life. That is a torturous form of death, with no chance of reprieve. To add to their pain, they have to watch their family visit them every day through love and obligation, and feel their pain and suffering as well as their physical pain. That emotional pain is just as painful as the physical pain they experience every day of their life, whatever remains of their life. I repeat: That is not life. For some of those terminally ill people who exist like that, the bill provides the opportunity to end their torture to allow them to die with dignity. That is not ending life because they have no life. They have a painful existence, and the bill provides relief.

I have waxed and waned about supporting voluntary assisted dying. I have always believed that no person, no government has the right to take a life. But when confronted directly with the situation on two occasions, I formed a different perspective. The first instance was on a visit to Grafton Base Hospital at the request of the brother whose sister was terminal. I confess I had a change of heart seeing his sister lying in bed, bombed out on pain-killing drugs, out of it and not engaging; seeing the love, torment, anguish and look of helplessness in the family as they sat by the bed. I sensed the feeling of love and obligation to visit daily and the impact it was having on them. I realised that voluntary assisted dying was not sanctioned murder because she was not alive. She did not have the spark that is life. It was not going to take anything from her, but give her merciful relief. It was in fact a blessing.

The second instance was when a family asked me to visit their dying father in their home at Ulmarra. He was in his 80s, and was dying of mesothelioma. He told me he was always a strong physical man, but now he was confined to his upstairs bed, terminal and suffering. He could not go into his backyard, could not in fact get out of bed. He was relying on his family to cater for his most basic human needs. He had no hope of recovery. He had limited time left and his condition was deteriorating. All his future held for him was more physical pain and emotional pain, knowing his family loved him and doted on him. As much as his family loved him, it was not enough to ease the mental anguish that intensified the overall pain he was feeling. He wanted to die, and

as much as his family loved him, they believed deep down that was his only respite. They begged me to support any legislation that would give him the opportunity to die with dignity, to finally rest in peace. Then I received a letter from Mrs Chris Kelly on 27 March 2016. She wrote to me, the Prime Minister of the day, the Premier of the day and other people of influence. She succinctly encapsulated the mood of the family and their dying loved one, which was the genesis of the bill. She wrote:

To Whom it May Concern

We are writing to you as a family in the hope that our dad's death (suicide) was not in vain and someone will listen regarding the Euthanasia debate.

Our father/husband Kenneth Stanley Dickson aged 81 was suffering, terribly with his third bout of cancer. Fifteen months ago dad was diagnosed with terminal Oesophagus cancer and wasn't expected to live past 3 months, but instead he suffered another 12 months This cancer is a slow and painful death sentence. Although Dad was on a lot of medication some days it just wasn't enough and the side effects of the medications was almost unbearable. Dad got down to a weight of just 45 kgs. Dad was a true gentleman loved and respected by everyone that knew him. It hurt Dad's dignity and pride that his daughters and wife had to shower him and change his dirty pants, but we would do it all again for him tomorrow.

Our beautiful Dad took his own life on Friday 9 October 2015 at home which he shared with his wife, Joan and Downs Syndrome son, Jason. Dad left behind a note (a copy is attached) expressing his desperation to the end. All he wanted was for someone to help end his suffering so that he could die in peace with dignity which is what he deserved. If an animal is suffering to this extent you would "put them down" surely we can do this for the terminally ill humans. Dad would want us to follow up on his note and keep the Euthanasia debate going until hopefully one day it will be legalised so that people that have suffered and will suffer with a terminal illness in the future can leave this life With the dignity that they also deserve.

Dad was a devoted Christian man. Towards the end he became a strong supporter for Euthanasia to be legalised in Australia. This is where we are hoping you can help spread the word and advocate for change. It was tearing dad apart to watch his family trying to keep him as comfortable as possible, he didn't want to be a burden. That was the kind of man he was.

What dad went through, especially in the end, was horrific. He made the heartbreaking decision to take his own life outside the family home. Jason, who is Downs Syndrome, was the one to find dad and that made the situation even worse, if that was possible. Jason is still saying that dad is coming home soon, he just doesn't understand.

We all realise that there would need to be very strict guidelines if Euthanasia was to be legalised in Australia, but surely people that have a terminal illness with no chance of a cure and suffered like our Dad did would fit into this category.

It really makes us wonder that if the people that make these decisions to not legalise Euthanasia in Australia had a family member in the same situation, I am sure they would agree with it as being the most peaceful and humane way to end peoples suffering.

We have sent this letter to the people below in the hope you can all help this worthy cause together. Thank you in advance for reading our letter.

Regards,

Joan, Julie, Mark, Jo-Anne, Christine, Bradley and Jason

Chris Kelly agreed to my reading the letter in the House when I asked her. I thought it described exactly what a family, what a person went through when he was terminal. It highlighted the fact that it was only himself that he could rely on, nobody else. There was no bill to provide him with that respite, that relief and that support he needed to end his life. [*Extension of time*]

If we do not support the bill, how do we answer the Kelly family? How do we answer any family who is going through the same thing? What do we say to those people who are terminal, who are in pain, who are tortured every day and who do not live life? Can we put ourselves in their shoes and honestly say, "We know better than you"? Someone is dying a horrible death, and we know what is good for them. I do not believe we do, and I do not believe we have the right to deny them the right to die when they are in so much pain, with no chance of recovery. We know that palliative care provides some relief to terminal patients, and some may find comfort in their last days, weeks or months. But it will not provide the answer for many others and that is where the bill provides a compassionate choice for someone to end their life. We have to do better than what we are currently doing. We know that some terminal patients resort to suicide to end their misery. Quite frankly, that is cruel, archaic and inhumane in this twenty-first century woke society, where we are so deeply entrenched in social justice that we forget about basic human rights. There is nothing more basic than this.

I will not speak about the details of the bill or the safeguards, as many before me have described them well. This is not sanctioned murder. It is not the thin edge of the wedge. The bill has strict, narrow eligibility criteria. It is not for everyone and you cannot bump off Uncle Charlie to get your hands on the inheritance. There are checks and balances within the bill to protect those who are eligible and choose to go down this path. It is a choice. There are checks and balances to ensure that medical practitioners behave ethically and that it is not sanctioned murder. Earlier in my speech I said I waxed and waned about supporting the bill, and I know it is divisive. I know there are those with an opposing opinion. I have received many calls and correspondence from many constituents both for and against the bill. Whilst it is a conscience vote, I believe most in my electorate would support the bill because it is the right thing to do. I support the bill, and commend it to the House.