

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

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

Mrs SHELLEY HANCOCK (South Coast—Minister for Local Government) (13:37): I contribute to debate on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021 as one of the final speakers to make a few brief comments. I say "brief" because I do not want to prolong in any way the debate on the bill. I feel a sense of impatience, as I often do in this place, that things take too long. We have taken too long in New South Wales to catch up with the rest of Australia. I do not want this to be prolonged over the New Year. We must come to a sense of finality. I also make some reflections on some of the comments I have received as the member for South Coast. Those comments are always the most important determinants in any decision I make in this place, and they have been since I was elected as the member for South Coast in 2003.

Firstly, I thank my friends sitting opposite, the member for Sydney, Alex Greenwich, and the member for Lake Macquarie, Greg Piper, for their incredible leadership and advocacy in this area. Over the past few months the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill was developed, drafted and introduced into the Legislative Assembly, along with many others. In particular, Alex provided a continuous stream of information to all of us, as we deliberated on the issue. When we had questions to ask, he was always there to answer. Greg as well. We have become used to that calm and respectful demeanour from Alex over the years. I thank him for that and I congratulate him and Greg for the way they have handled this with care, love and compassion. I am honoured to call them my friends.

Secondly, many people have spoken about the contributions of those on both sides of the debate and their respectful tones. I could not listen to many of the contributions on Friday, but I listened to some. It was the same story of respectful contributions, as often happens in these kinds of debates. I can only say that I respect everybody for the nature of the debate. Undoubtedly, all members have considered their position very carefully and, in addition, sought the views of their electorates via surveys, the reams of correspondence we have all received or text messages. Personally, I have absolutely no experience of a loved one dying an agonising death. Even though my father was quite ill towards the end of his life and suffered a number of conditions throughout his life, he passed away quickly as my mother did. However, that is not to say that I do not know of individuals or friends or people in my electorate or in other electorates who have suffered absolutely agonising and unnecessary suffering when their death was imminent due to their illness.

It is absolutely unacceptable in this day and age of modern medicine that something cannot be done to alleviate peoples' suffering, but it cannot. Despite the best efforts of the wonderful men and women who work in palliative care—and I know many of them—people still suffer in pain. Due to this bill being introduced I think we will see some improvements to palliative care; the Premier has given that indication. In my view, enhancement of palliative care services across this State to alleviate pain and suffering towards the end of life will be one positive outcome of the bill. Well done to the members opposite, my friends the member for Sydney and the member for Lake Macquarie, who maybe saw that as another positive outcome of the bill being introduced.

I now turn to the views of my electorate, which are always first and foremost for me as they have been since 2003 when I was first elected. As the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill became public and everybody started to talk about it, I decided to send a survey to my constituents. I can honestly say that I was not entirely sure what the results would be or how residents would feel. The results were absolutely outstanding. The return of many hundreds of surveys to my office showed that 94 per cent in the electorate of South Coast were in favour of voluntary assisted dying. That was just the survey.

My office received correspondence in the form of phone calls and text messages, and I had conversations with many people throughout the South Coast. The results of that correspondence and conversations mirrored the 94 per cent in favour of the bill in my electorate. What a great electorate I belong to. Some of those conversations were so wonderful, and many people conveyed to me the experiences of their loved ones and what they went through. Should we not be listening to them because they and their families suffered when watching their loved ones die. I do not want to take up too much time of this House, but I want to include some comments because I think they are really pertinent. One resident wrote:

People deserve to live and die with dignity. Legalising assisted dying offers choice, many won't use this option but knowing it is there as an option brings a great degree of comfort to those suffering terminal, degenerative conditions, which

are physically painful for the individual. No one likes to think of themselves as becoming palliative at any point in their life but it is a reality and I'm sure many of us would at least feel some reassurance knowing the option was available regardless of whether or not we choose to take the option. We view euthanasia as humane when it comes to the suffering of beloved pets—

how many people have said that in this Chamber—

but not our loved ones and there is no reason why this should be so. Religious opinion has no place in politics. This should be about what is ethical and humane.

Another resident wrote:

Once you see a family member suffering a horrible death without dignity and listening to them beg for it to end. You wouldn't think twice about passing this bill.

Another resident from Nowra said:

I have stage 4 metastatic breast cancer. Please allow me to die when the pain becomes too much for me to bare. Palliative care isn't good enough. Let me keep my dignity.

Another resident commented:

My late husband died 4yrs ago from Cystic Fibrosis, a cruel and horrid genetic disease. To put it bluntly he drowned in his own lungs, this was both cruel to watch and also to care for him in this late and stage of life, and his suffering was cruel and so sad to watch.

The next comment, which is slightly longer, incorporates what I just said about the effects on family members of watching their loved ones die, and we should not ignore them. The comment reads:

We already have assisted dying it's just currently inhumane. My father suffered a horrible condition and we knew he would not have wanted us to prolong his life. We had no idea when we made that decision in the hospital that it meant slowly watching him die of starvation and dehydration over 11 days. We sat by his side during the death rattles (yes turns out that's a real and horrible thing), we sat till he didn't have enough fluid left to rattle with every breath any more. We watched him turn from our dad to someone that resembled a concentration camp prisoner more than the person we loved. My mum had to stop coming after 7 days. She couldn't take it any longer and was a mess and we worried the stress would bring on a stroke due to her own medical conditions. My siblings and I sat by his side that eleven days in turns and I honestly think we all walked away with some sort of PTS afterwards. It's been over a year and I'm still traumatised by it. I used to be very anti assisted dying. But I've now been through the experience and know it is inhumane to both the person dying and their family. It opened my eyes. Once someone goes into palliative care they are never coming out. They, or their family if they are beyond that, should have the right to decide if they want to die quickly or slowly. As the doctors told us at the time, it can take up to two weeks for a person to die once they remove food and water. Nobody should have to go through that if that is not their choice.

I will read one final comment. I could have included another hundred but I will not because I am impatient about getting this bill passed. Another wrote:

By allowing euthanasia less people will die horrible deaths. This would save a great deal of heartache for the families left behind and less effect on the responders. People opposing euthanasia should have no rights over the people requesting help to ease their pain and pass away with dignity—with the love and support of their family and friends. What is the meaning of mercy? Why is it ok to show mercy to animals but not our fellow human beings?

That was just a small snapshot of the incredibly sensitive comments that I received over the past weeks and months. To be honest, I did have some lingering doubts about the bill from the beginning that maybe elderly people would be open to coercion and abuse from less than respectable family members wanting their inheritance a bit more quickly. But I have thought a lot about it and I have read a lot about it, and I am satisfied that the safeguards in the bill will overcome those actions that may be taken by family members. I know some members still have concerns about the bill, but I say to them that the proposed legislation is a pretty simple concept. It is about mercy and compassion. It is about caring for people and loving people. It is about our loved ones. We love them, but we do not want to see them suffer. That is how simple the bill is. [*Extension of time*]

Those who want to complicate it by moving amendments, which will prolong the passage of the bill, are not doing themselves any credit. They should look to their own electorates. They should look to the Statewide numbers in favour of the bill, which are high. I realise they are not as high in my electorate, which is at 94

per cent, but overwhelmingly the State wants this legislation to be passed. I have heard comments about how we should value hope and the sanctity of life, but surely it is the right of every individual to die with dignity when there is no hope left, when the sanctity of life has gone and life is just about pain, agony and suffering. I support the bill wholeheartedly. I applaud the efforts of those who made such an enormous effort to introduce the bill to this House. I implore people to not prolong the passage of the bill through this House. I reiterate my love for my friends opposite, the member for Sydney and the member for Lake Macquarie, for introducing the bill in this House.