

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

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

Ms JODIE HARRISON (Charlestown) (16:15): I contribute to debate on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. Death and dying is not something many of us are comfortable with. Many of us struggle with discussions with loved ones when they are terminally ill. The loss of a loved one is a terrible thing. I recall the last few hours of my father's life when he was dying from vascular disease and kidney failure in hospital. I had to ask my father whether he wanted to be resuscitated if his heart stopped. He said no. It was one of the hardest— and certainly the most upsetting—conversations in my life. Death is often hard. It is hard for the dying, and it is hard for their loved ones and friends who are left behind.

I believe it is my role as a parliamentarian to make people's lives better, from the initial moments to the final stages of their lives. My focus is not on making it easier for people to die. My focus is on making it easier for people to live a good life that they enjoy. There is no doubt that terminally ill people deserve better palliative care, and no doubt the announcement by the Premier that he wants New South Wales to have the best palliative care system in the world will make a difference to the last months of many. But there are some for whom it will not and cannot make a difference. There is suffering that cannot be alleviated by palliative care. As Andrew Denton from Go Gentle states, "Think of the things which make you, you, and then take them away one by one." This is the suffering this bill addresses.

We encourage children to make their own choices from a young age. We should give that right to the dying. This bill, which I am pleased to co-sponsor, establishes a safe framework for a terminally ill person who is dying and suffering to choose the timing and circumstances of their death. I think, overall, it strikes the right balance between ensuring that it will not be misused and ensuring that it is accessible for those who need it. I will not use the limited time I have to go into the provisions of the bill. Other members who have preceded me in this debate, particularly the member for Sydney, have done that more than adequately. I thank the member for Sydney for the incredible amount of work he has done to bring this bill to the Parliament and to this point, and for enabling each of us in this place to have a full understanding of it.

I have had hundreds of people in my electorate contact me regarding this bill. Some do not support voluntary assisted dying. I respect their view, and I thank them for engaging in this very difficult and emotional topic. I also note the Vote Compass poll, undertaken a couple of years ago, of more than 1,900 people in my electorate. It indicated that 82 per cent of people in my electorate agree that terminally ill people should be able to end their own lives with medical assistance. In fact, some 60 per cent strongly agreed. The vast majority of people who have written to me support voluntary assisted dying and want the Parliament to pass the bill as soon as possible. I give voice to some of them here today. Julie from Eleebana wrote:

I watched my partner battling terminal brain cancer some years ago, but the image of his suffering and distress in the last three months of his life will always be with me. Once all hope is lost, the pain and suffering become intolerable, despite the best attempts of palliative care workers.

Louise from Warners Bay wrote:

My precious father died an excruciating death over 19 days at the Waratah Hospice. He pleaded with us to help him. We pleaded with the doctors and staff to help him to no avail. The best they could do was pain relief and nil by mouth causing him to basically die of starvation. This goes on daily and I want a choice to die peacefully and with dignity when my time comes.

Wendy from Warners Bay wrote:

Having worked as a nurse for many years I well understand there are illnesses and conditions where a managed death is much more preferable than suffering. There are worse things than death.

Whether you choose the option or not is so very personal but the choice is what's important. **She went on:**

I feel that it's important to have this option available as I know there are circumstances where I would choose this for myself and have seen many instances where it's a choice others would make if available despite the availability of symptom management and treatments.

Marcia from Warners Bay wrote:

My sister suffered from progressive supranuclear palsy, an incurable condition which results in a deterioration of all physical function but no effect on mental acuity or function. From diagnosis she and we knew that she had 7 years, at best, of continual loss of mobility, speech, swallowing, etc, in full knowledge of what was occurring, followed by death.

Please allow people with similar incurable conditions the choice to die with dignity.

Rebecca from Kotara was among many who wrote twice to me. In 2005 her mother died suffering with lung cancer. In 2020 her sister, who was also her best friend, died suffering a slow, lingering, painful death also with lung cancer. In 2018 at 66 years of age Rebecca was diagnosed with stage 4 bowel cancer. Rebecca has had three surgeries, including a colostomy, three cycles of chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Rebecca can no longer do many things she used to be able to do. She shared this with me:

In late 2018, I lost a beautiful son to suicide. He was 37 and chose to die rather than live and that breaks my heart. Having watched a mother and sister die from cancer and losing a son to suicide, I know there is a difference between someone who, despite doing everything they could to fight their disease, has come to the end of the journey and someone who chooses to take their own life.

The right to die is about the sanctity of life and what it means to be alive. Giving the terminally ill the right to die gives them another option to choose; in fact it is probably the only thing you get to choose at the end of your life because everything else is out of your control. I wish I did not have cancer; there are many dreams I would like to fulfil; whether I do or not is another matter ... However when the time comes and my only option is to die, I want to die peacefully at a time and place of my choosing.

A few months ago in a shopping centre I listened intently to a woman while she told me her story. Her husband had been terminally ill and suffering immeasurably. He explained to her his well thought out plan to end his suffering, choosing his time and place of death. Knowing the pain he was in and loving him deeply, she supported his plan. He had made his doctor aware of the plan, told his family members and they all had the opportunity to share loving words and say goodbye to him. He told his friends and loved ones that he had to be alone at the time of his death. He died in the place and at the time of his own choosing, ending the suffering from his terminal illness. In her grief, his wife was interviewed by police in relation to his death. It was his decision and she had taken no part in it apart from supporting his decision and loving him. How can we allow this to be?

I recognise and thank the hundreds of people in my electorate who have shared their views and stories with me. Those stories show that we have to do better dealing with death and dying and indescribable suffering. I would have supported the previous bill that was before the Parliament. Stories like the ones I have shared today have strengthened my resolve to support this bill. There are people dying and suffering immeasurably right now across New South Wales who are desperate for the choice to die in the place they choose, at the time of their choosing. We in this place have the ability to allow them that choice by supporting the bill. I support terminally ill people who are suffering being able to choose voluntary assisted dying. I support the bill.