

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

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

Mr GEOFF PROVEST (Tweed) (11:35): I speak in debate on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. We have heard, and will hear, from a lot of members about the bill. In my time in this place there has been a number of free votes, and the process creates a great deal of concern and angst and at times worries me. All members come to this place with opinions about life. Some have strong opinions about religion, football or the weather. I often sit back and wonder whether that is why we stood to be elected as members of Parliament. All members were elected to this place to represent the majority of their communities. For nearly 15 years now, I have listened to various debates. Sometimes I find that my colleagues on both sides of the House have difficulty separating their personal view from that of their wider community. I think that is a shame. Members need to sit back and say, "Why am I here?" I am here because I put forward various policies and I got the majority of people in my electorate to vote for me. I use that as a template for what we are about to do here.

I will be up-front: I will be voting in favour of the bill, following careful consideration. I believe it has all the key safeguards that are obviously needed for this type of legislation. It will see New South Wales follow every State in the country in legalising voluntary assisted dying for people with incurable medical conditions who have only a short time to live. In the end, it is all about giving people choice. Some people have said it is all about dignity, but I am not sure there can be dignity in death. It was Martin Luther King who said:

Every man must do two things alone; he must do his own believing and his own dying.

The residents in my electorate have more experience with this issue than most others in the State, being, on average, older and wiser. Dying comes up in conversation, and so does euthanasia. Some people who support the idea say they do not really care whether it is legal. They tell me, with a nod and a wink, "It happens all the time, Geoffrey." Others say they do not want the last thing they do on this earth to be a crime. They certainly do not want their loved ones, who may have helped them with their choice, fall foul of the law. That is why, on balance, this bill is the right thing to do.

I am more interested in what happens in the lead-up. We have fantastic palliative care organisations in Tweed, and this is the perfect opportunity to place in *Hansard* the Tweed's appreciation for their wonderful work. Tweed Palliative Support has a magnificent Wedgetail Retreat community hospice nestled in the Tweed subtropical rainforest. Its proud patron is the widow of Nationals legend, Doug Anthony, and, legend in her own right, Margot Anthony, AM. I have been privileged to have an association with Tweed Palliative Support [TPS] throughout my 14 years representing the Tweed in this place.

Tweed Palliative Support Inc. is a multi-award-winning charity that was founded in 1998. It is a well-established community-run organisation that provides free and donation-based support services for people living with life-limiting illnesses. The hospice-at-home service is designed to keep people in their homes for as long as possible by providing help with shopping, personal care, transport to medical appointments, as well as respite for their primary carer. If it is not feasible to remain at home, people are offered the opportunity to come to Wedgetail Retreat. They also loan medical equipment such as beds, wheelchairs, et cetera. Each year the hospice trains up to 20 volunteers, who then take on various roles within the charity: home respite, transport, office work, fundraising, et cetera.

Wedgetail Retreat community began with a dream and now offers 24/7 specialised palliative care in our region. Clients with life-limiting illnesses and their families are welcomed into a modern home environment with friendly registered nurses and trained volunteer palliative carers. Meredith Dennis, OAM, is the president. Meredith has been an inspiring palliative care innovator for nearly two decades, as well as a volunteer. As president and volunteer coordinator, Meredith is involved in all aspects of running the organisation. Meredith understands firsthand what it is like to have a significant family member moving towards the end of their life. Her father was one of the first people to spend his last days in beautiful surroundings.

I wish to quickly refer to Queensland. On 23 September 2021, the Queensland Voluntary Assisted Dying Act received assent, which brings Queensland into line and provides many safeguards. One of the interesting features of the legislation is eligibility. As all members of this House know, New South Wales shares a border with Queensland which has been highlighted recently with border closures, et cetera. Section 12 (2) (a) of the Act states that "a person who is a long term resident of a place close to the Queensland border and who works in Queensland and received medical treatment in Queensland" can be granted exemptions to satisfy their

concern. The Act becomes effective in January 2023. One of the main requirements is that a person must live in Queensland for 12 months before accessing the provisions of the Act. In some ways my residents may qualify to receive voluntary assisted dying in Queensland.

I have had personal experience and only wish that this legislation was available when my father was ill. After my father had been suffering for some time, in 1999 I watched him endure a very slow and painful death. My father was a teacher and a principal. He was a hardworking and extremely intelligent man—a man who was robbed of everything that was important to him; his mind. He had no quality of life and he did not want to be here. I watched as my father, who was a powerful man in his own right, came in and out of consciousness, soiled himself in bed, and with catheters inserted. It was dreadful. There was no quality of life. He spent the last 10 months of his life in the Wauchope hospital. That had a dire consequence for my mother. I could see that her health was rapidly deteriorating because of having made daily trips to the hospital. When my father was out of consciousness could become abusive.

As I had enduring power of attorney, I had to make a decision. I have gone through this experience twice, the most recent being three years ago in relation to my mother, who was 94. When the surgeons and the doctors—experts who are far more qualified than I—came to me and said, "There is nothing more we can do—absolutely nothing. All we can do is try to assist with their pain", referring to each of my parents. Having the right to make the decision, I said, in relation to my mother and my father, "I really don't want them to suffer anymore." At that stage my mother was conscious sometimes and she would say to me, "I don't want to be here, son. I am suffering so much pain. I just don't want to be here." I authorised the doctors to alleviate that pain. At that point the doctors advised me that if they gave to each of my parents more and more morphine, their organs would eventually shut down. My father died within two days and my mother died within a day and a half. I will always remember that my mother actually thanked me. She said, "Thank you." I said, "It's all right to go, Mum. It's all right to go."

That is why I have a great deal of feeling about this legislation. I congratulate the member for Sydney, who has never been one to go backwards: He is always going forwards. I think this is really important legislation. I am sure this legislation will be passed. I encourage everyone to do so. I respect views, both for and against the legislation, but at the end of the day I think we have an onus on us to represent the people of New South Wales in this place and do the best we can to make our community strong. Having said that, I commend the bill to the House.