

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

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

Mr PETER SIDGREAVES (Camden) (12:25): I make a brief contribution to debate on the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. I start by acknowledging the feedback that I received from residents in the Camden electorate. Regardless of their views on this bill, I thank them for taking the time to let me know their views on the bill and on euthanasia more generally. I also acknowledge all members in this place who have spoken on this bill and expressed their views and beliefs, and those of their electorates. In consideration of this bill, I have read copious amounts of correspondence and discussed the bill with residents of the Camden electorate regardless of their views. I have also surveyed the residents of the Camden electorate and communicated to them through publishing and republishing the survey on social media and emailing the survey to residents.

The survey asked not only the overarching question of whether residents supported voluntary assisted dying, but also other questions specific to some of the provisions in the bill that is before us. To confirm the survey responses were legitimately the views expressed by constituents of the Camden electorate, all responses were validated against a database of enrolled constituents. In total I received 1,567 emails, calls and survey results from residents of the Camden electorate expressing their views on this bill. Sixty eight per cent of residents supported the bill, 31 per cent opposed the bill and under 1 per cent of residents were undecided. Based on this sample of feedback, it is clear to me that the majority of residents of the Camden electorate are asking me to support this bill.

During the lead-up to the debate on this bill in this place I have personally been deeply conflicted. In truth, I probably still am. I am conflicted because on the one hand I am a Catholic and have been taught to preserve life. I have spoken to some people who have told me to separate my religious beliefs when considering the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill. That is not as easy as they may suspect, because many of my core values have been developed based on Catholicism and Christianity. In making my decision on whether to support or not support the bill I was determined to make my decision, at least in part, based on my own core values. On the other hand, I believe when someone has a terminal illness and their pain cannot be eased through medication such as morphine and they are in good conscience, should they not have the right to choose? There are some matters in the bill that concern me, and they are matters relating to the right of people with a terminal illness to voluntarily choose.

My first concern is when a person with a terminal illness is coerced into making a decision to voluntarily end their life. I will give two examples of this. The first would be when the person with a terminal illness has a will that nominates their family or carers as beneficiaries. What would stop them from continually whispering in the ear of a person with a terminal illness words to the effect of "It's time for you to go; you've had a great life"? The second example would be a person with a terminal illness who has a family member caring for them and who may have been caring for them over long periods but potentially has had enough. Again, the carer whispers in their ear. My second concern is when a person with a terminal illness does not have a family, carer or support network around them so decides to end their life, where possibly if they had a support network around them they would make a different decision. I personally do not believe the bill, or possibly any bill, could provide safeguards against those concerns. Without going into detail, I have other concerns with the bill that have been raised by other members already and I do not feel it is necessary to outline them again.

I now turn to palliative care and my own experience with it. In 2020 my mother passed away from terminal cancer. I mention that because in the weeks leading up to her passing my mother received what can only be described as outstanding palliative care at North Shore Private Hospital before passing away in peace. I again thank the nurses and doctors who cared for my mother in her dying days. One of the reasons I support the bill is because it provides individuals with choice. However, I make it perfectly clear that voluntary assisted dying does not replace the need for high-quality palliative care. The Government is investing in palliative care, and Camden Hospital is testament to that. That is not to say more could not be done. Ongoing investment would support modern palliative care equipment and practices to ensure high-quality palliative care is available to everyone in the State. Widespread high-quality palliative care is needed so that people have a real choice in their decision to end their life.

Again, I thank everyone in the Camden electorate who provided me with feedback on the bill. I also thank all the doctors and nurses who work to preserve life with their expert knowledge, skills and experience.

At the very least, the bill provides that a terminally ill person with the capacity for decision-making can choose the way they end their life. Generally speaking, the safeguards in the bill need improvement, and I expect to see amendments to some of those safeguards that will only lead to an improved bill. Ultimately, I support the bill because the large majority of residents in the Camden electorate who provided me with feedback on the bill asked me to support it. My strong view is that it would not be right to reach out and consult with my community only to vote against their wishes. I commend the bill to the House.