

VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

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

Mr GURMESH SINGH (Coffs Harbour) (13:33): Yesterday marks the three-year anniversary of my pre-selection. In the lead up to that day I had cause to reflect on my thoughts and positions on many issues, including the concept of voluntary assisted dying. I knew that the day may come when I would vote in this House on that particular issue. Our Australian culture celebrates life. Much is written and taught about how to live a good life, but little is taught about death and what it means to have a good death, let alone what the death process and end of life looks like for most people. Like many others in this place, I have seen death close-up. Both of my grandparents died at home of very different deaths, including one in the weeks leading up to my preselection.

I put on the record that neither of my grandparents would have been eligible for voluntary assisted dying under the bill. To be eligible for voluntary assisted dying under the bill, a person must be over the age of 18; be assessed as having decision-making capabilities, and have made the decision without duress; be terminally ill with death expected within six months, or within 12 months for neurodegenerative diseases; the condition must cause intolerable suffering; and if the doctor assesses the person as having met the criteria, they must refer them to other specialists like oncologists or psychologists. If they are eligible, they must sign a declaration in front of two witnesses. Then, a voluntary assisted dying board will consider the application and can refuse the application if it does not believe all the criteria is met. An independent witness must be present when the health practitioner administers the drugs, and must certify that it is voluntary. The patient can withdraw from the process at any time.

The Coffs Harbour electorate was polled on that very issue. The question asked was: Should terminally ill patients be able to end their own life with medical assistance? That question goes further than the bill currently before the House. Despite that, 82 per cent of people polled in the Coffs Harbour electorate were in favour, with 10 per cent being neutral and only 8 per cent being against. That survey, along with the hundreds of letters, emails, phone calls and other pieces of correspondence, indicated strong support for the bill in my electorate. I thank everyone who has reached out for the respectful way in which they have shared their views and personal stories. That goes for people on both sides of the debate.

Other members have spoken about palliative care during the debate. Palliative care is and should be a key component of end-of-life care, and the management of the end-of-life process. The vast majority of terminally ill people will not be eligible for voluntary assisted dying under the bill, and therefore may rely on palliative care for their end-of-life care. However, voluntary assisted dying and palliative care are not, and do not need to be, mutually exclusive. I welcome any changes to palliative care that will improve end-of-life care, and we should make those improvements independent of the passage of the bill. I also put on the record that no-one will be compelled to choose or accept voluntary assisted dying under the bill. I believe there are adequate safeguards in place, with more safeguards flagged as amendments to prevent the misuse of voluntary assisted dying. It will be a choice offered to those who need it, and want it.

I conclude by commending the member for Sydney and his staff, the co-sponsors of the bill and every member who has participated in the debate in a respectful manner. As members of the Parliament, we all come into this place to make the world a better place. We have all been given a free vote independent of party lines. All members feel very passionately about this, and will vote according to their own views. I hope that the amendments and the amendment process will be carried out in the same spirit as the debate so far. Personally, I stand with 82 per cent of my community. I will support the bill and the amendments that I feel are appropriate. I commend the bill to be House.