

## VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

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

**Ms ANNA WATSON (Shellharbour) (16:07):** I support the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021 and I thank the member for Sydney for the drafting of this legislation. I understand that voluntary assisted dying is a complex issue that attracts broad opinions across the community, regardless of political persuasions. However, I speak in support of the bill because I think it is the right time for people suffering from terminal illness in New South Wales to finally have a say about their future. This is a choice. It is not compulsory, nor is it coercive. No-one ever wants to face the decision of whether they should request assistance to voluntarily end their life. But the fact of the matter is that we have all seen loved ones, whether they be family or friends, suffer terribly from terminal illness and not have the option about how their life should end. They often die in excruciating pain and may not have the opportunity for their loved ones to say one last goodbye. I support the bill because people suffering from terminal illness should have the option to end their life with dignity and on their terms, surrounded by family and friends in a loving environment and not one of pain and solitude.

It is time for New South Wales to reflect the reform we have witnessed across the country and the rest of the world. Similar laws have now passed in Victoria, Western Australia, Tasmania and New Zealand. New South Wales is the only State that is yet to pass voluntary assisted dying laws. I urge all members of both Houses, regardless of their political affiliation, to stand together in solidarity and hear the voices of the most vulnerable in our society. As it stands in New South Wales, people in this situation cannot legally end their lives. What we have seen happen is that some people suffering from a terminal illness are ending their own lives, but they die alone because they cannot tell their friends or family for fear of legally implicating them in the circumstances of their death. That must be a horrible way to die and it upsets me to see families go through that due to lack of legislation allowing them to seek assistance in ending their life. The bill seeks to change that.

In supporting the bill, I acknowledge the fantastic work that those working in palliative care do. There is no doubt that palliative care services in this State need greater funding. I commend the Health Services Union [HSU], which always supports its members. It is a strong union, led by Gerard Hayes. It must be a very difficult time for the union, with differing opinions about this legislation. Regardless of that, HSU members know their union is always there to support them, just as we are in this place today turning our minds to terminally ill people across New South Wales.

The bill is not intended to be an alternative to well-funded palliative care services in this State, and anyone who argues that that is the case should do more research in the area. The bill is for those people who need other options when palliative care cannot meet their needs. Palliative care is not always the right option for everyone. Sometimes people just have too much pain and too much suffering, and therefore seek something more. The bill will allow them to end their life in a safe, controlled environment under the circumstances they choose. I say to those who see it as one or the other that we need both: greater funding for palliative care and voluntary assisted dying for those who are eligible and who seek it. We can have both because the bill is about choice. Choice is at the root of this argument.

The debate surrounding voluntary assisted dying is not new. Much of the concern expressed in the debate stems from people doubting whether the appropriate safeguards will be put in place so that people are not taken advantage of or pressured by their families with adverse motives. The bill ensures that a person must have decision-making capacity and be acting voluntarily and without coercion. To prove this, the person must undergo two independent eligibility assessments by two separate doctors. Doctors and nurses must undergo voluntary assisted dying training and will be able to conscientiously object. These processes will have proper oversight, each step taken must be documented, and all appropriate avenues that can be undertaken by a patient will be offered.

Every time we have this debate some people set out to fearmonger and scare the public into thinking voluntary assisted dying is the end of society as we know it. I respect the different opinions people have, but when discussing such a sensitive topic I believe we should rely on facts rather than speculation. So let us set the record straight. The bill will not force people to end their lives, nor will it allow their families to pressure

them into ending their lives. The bill is about terminally ill patients making a conscious decision of their own free will to start a process to end their lives painlessly. Public polling has shown consistently that the community supports having the option of voluntary assisted dying. It is about time that this is enacted in legislation.

The bill allows patients who are suffering from a terminal illness with no hope of recovery to make an informed, careful decision to seek assistance in ending their life. They are then given 48 hours to think over that decision, once all the requisite assessments have been met. There are strong safeguards in place to ensure the bill is not misused. We cannot ignore the needs of the terminally ill in New South Wales any longer. I am proud to stand here today to speak in support of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021 on behalf of the people of Shellharbour and the rest of New South Wales. I commend the bill to the House.