

Deputy Victorian Premier moves to block Andrews' euthanasia bill

SAMANTHA HUTCHINSON THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM October 18, 2017

Victorian MPs who fear the state's euthanasia plan could push vulnerable patients into assisted suicide are attempting to derail the legislation with a series of last-minute amendments.

Deputy Premier James Merlino last night attempted to put an indefinite halt to Daniel Andrews's signature assisted dying scheme, with a "reasoned amendment" that puts the bill on hold while concerns are addressed.

Yesterday was the first day of debate on the assisted dying bill in the lower house, with an emotional Mr Andrews reflecting on his father's death and his personal reasons for supporting the bill.

"Until you see someone you love succumb to ... what some people say is a good death, then you start to think about what would be a bad death," the Premier said. "No one should suffer a bad death in the name of good ethics."

Victoria's voluntary assisted dying scheme, billed by its architects as the most conservative model in the world, is open to terminally ill patients older than 18 who are of sound mind and have less than 12 months to live.

The Andrews government is believed to have the numbers in the lower house for the bill to pass on a slim margin, but an increasingly vocal number of MPs, high-profile medicos and lawyers are highlighting gaps in the safeguards and calling for amendments and tighter legislation.

Leading Victorian human rights lawyer Peter Willis SC yesterday issued a 16-page critique of the legislation, arguing there were insufficient penalties and provisions to stop doctors from suggesting euthanasia to patients or from printing flyers and leaflets on the scheme for distribution at their medical practices.

Former Australian Medical Association president Mukesh Haikerwal and a host of senior medicos attended parliament yesterday to argue the scheme made it easier for people to access assisted suicide rather than quality palliative care. "It'll become easier for some terminal patients to access assisted dying than it will be to access high-quality palliative care ... and it's tragic," oncologist - Marion Harris said.

Opposition legal affairs spokesman Robert Clark agreed. "We should be striving to fix the problem, not providing death as a solution," he said.

Senior Liberal MP Ryan Smith will move as many as three amendments to the bill in an attempt to increase safeguards and keep a tighter record on the patients accessing the scheme.

"Most people have a view that it could very well pass, so let's soften some sections of it," Mr Smith said.

"If it's going to pass, I'd rather have a three-year review of how it's working than a five-year review. I'd also like to see proper record-keeping system so we can see how it's actually working."

Other amendments mooted by MPs include a mandatory mental-health assessment for applicants, increasing the length of the proposed 10-day cooling-off period to access the scheme, and tightening provisions that enable patients to shop around for a doctor who will give them consent to access the program.

Some MPs could support Mr Merlino's reasoned amendment, Mr Smith said.

"The reasoned amendment could be a get-out-of-jail-free card for people who want to vote no to this thing. They could vote for that amendment and send it away," Mr Smith said.