



October 21, 2019

Honourable Members, The Legislative Council
Government of Western Australia

Re: Misinformation Surrounding Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) & Coroner's Cases

Dear Honourable Members

We represent a network of over 770 health professionals across Australia involved with the care of those nearing their end of life or with significant health issues, who have serious concerns around the introduction of euthanasia and physician assisted suicide bills in Australia. On this occasion we write to you about the flawed interpretation of the coronial data on suicides in Victoria and Western Australia, respectively, that many Members of the Legislative Council have stated as the basis toward support of a VAD law.

Although no doubt of noble intent, an example is the honourable member for Agricultural Region, last week stating the findings were in support of VAD law, and that he would hope that at least half those who suicided or self harmed with terminal illness, may be prevented by a VAD law.

Reviewing the recently published detail of the Victorian coroner's data analysis based on 118 active cancer patients (1), it seems that 34% had had a history of mental illness, and only 42% of all cases having advanced cancer, meaning the remaining 58% had cancers at a early stage. Only 14% had had contact with a Palliative Care service, despite those being described as "illness probably related suicides" as having concerns about pain. Interestingly, 48% reported the heavy burden of cancer treatment as an issue, rather than the illness (a potentially avoidable burden). Those reported as "suicides likely being related to physical illness" made up only 10% of suicides in each state (one case per week).

These results also need to be further contextualised by what we already know through evidence on good medical practice and end of life care. Namely, that 35-40% of those patients who suicided were likely to have an undiagnosed depression (2), which would not have been part of their prior history, and that 35% of them were also likely to lack capacity in making decisions about their health (3). Strong evidence has also demonstrated that the desire to die fluctuates and diminishes closer to actual death, and significantly so when appropriate and good quality psychological and palliative care is delivered (4,5).

In summary, there is no definite evidence in the analysis that most or many of these suicides would have either met the WA eligibility criteria, nor that VAD would prevent similar cases in future. *Finding 33* of the WA End of Life Inquiry Report therefore needs correction. One important implication, however, is that lack of access to high quality specialist palliative care and other supports may have resulted in many of these cancer patients being driven to suicide, but there is no evidence to suggest lack of access to VAD drove this group as a whole to suicide. As a recent survey of 2000 WA residents has shown, 75% would want the Government to address Palliative Care service provision and regional access issues ahead of VAD.

Yours Sincerely on behalf of all signatories,

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References:

- 1.** Characteristics of patients with cancer who die by suicide: Coronial case series in an Australian state. Dwyer, J et al *Psycho-Oncology*, August 2019
- 2.** Depression, Hopelessness, and Desire for Hastened Death in Terminally Ill Patients With Cancer. Breitbart, W *Journal of the American Medical Association* (Dec. 13, 2000).
- 3.** Systematic Review on the prevalence of lack of capacity in medical and psychiatric settings. Lepping, P, et al *J Clin Med (Lond)* 2015; 15(4)
- 4.** Mental disorders and the desire for death in patients receiving palliative care for cancer. *BMJ Support Palliat Care*, June 2016 4:6(2)

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Dr David Lean, MBBS FRACP, Paediatrician, QLD

Dr Bronwyn Mueller, MBBS FRACGP DRANZCOG, General Practitioner, QLD

Dr Kerri Barnes, BAppSc(MedSc) MBBS DCH, General Practice registrar, QLD

Dr Faye Jordan, MBBS HON RACP PEM FACEM PHD SPTHY, Emergency Physician, QLD

Dr Kriscara Singh, Bpharm MD, Intern doctor, QLD

Ms Alicia Bruce, Medical Student, Student, NSW

Dr Shani Law-Davis, MBBS(Hons), Medical Officer, WA

Dr Dawn Glasgow, MBBS FACRRM, General Practitioner, NSW

Dr Jonathan Quinn, MBBS, Registrar, QLD

Dr Daphne Liu, MBBS FRACGP, General Practitioner, QLD

Dr Corne Esterhuysen, MBChB FACRRM, Medical Practitioner, QLD

Dr Troy Gianduzzo, MBBS FRACS, Medical Practitioner, QLD

Dr Kirsten Symmons, MBBS DCH DRANZCOG Adv FACCRM, Medical Practitioner, QLD

Mrs Susan Baumhammer, RN, Health Service Pastoral Care Coordinator, NSW

Dr Nicole Lu, MD, Medical Practitioner, VIC

Dr Eugene Khoo, MBBS Grad Dip Div Bchiro BSc (Hon) Bcomm, Medical Practitioner, NSW

Ms Fiona Nielsen, BAppSc (Occupational Therapy), Occupational Therapist, NSW

Ms Sieders Lea, Registered Nurse, Nurse, NSW

Mrs Kimberley Town, Registered Nurse, Nurse, QLD

Dr Brian Biggs, MBBS FRACGP, General Practitioner, QLD

Dr Kevin Plumpton, MBChB FRACP FCICM, Paediatric Intensivist, QLD

Dr Philip Wong, MBBS, Haematology Advanced Trainee, QLD

Dr Elizabeth Grossa, MBBS FAFRM, Medical Practitioner, QLD

Dr Johanna Lynch, PhD MBBS FRACGP Grad Cert (Grief and Loss), GP Psychotherapist, QLD

Dr David Gilpin, MBBS FRACS, Medical Practitioner, QLD