Submission to the Victorian Government Ministerial Advisory Panel on Assisted Dying

This submission is made in response to the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill Discussion Paper

We, the undersigned, make the following points against assumptions and questions posed within the above named document:

1. In line with the World Health Organisation (WHO) definition and the Australia and New Zealand Society of Palliative Medicine (ANZSPM) Position Statement, the provision of Palliative Care does not include the practice of euthanasia or physician assisted suicide. Furthermore, the provision of a medication to deliberately end a life is not an extension or logical consequence of good clinical practice. To help a person to end their life is not a medical treatment.

   The speciality of Palliative Care neither hastens nor defers death. We concentrate on clarifying the medical goals that best ensure the overall welfare and quality of life of the person and their carers. If legislation were to approve assisting people to end their lives, any such ‘assistance’ should not be considered part of the provision of Palliative Care. Doing so would only distort community understanding of the role of Palliative Care and create ambiguity about what is ethical and optimal medical treatment.

2. The Inquiry Committee’s final document on end of life choices makes forty-nine (49) recommendations to ensure the adequate care of those approaching the end of their lives. https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/file_uploads/LSIC_pF3XBB2L.pdf
These recommendations include addressing societal stressors, resource and health systems issues, the need for greater and more consistent Palliative Care provision and respite, as well as inadequacies around the support of the vulnerable and their families or carers.

   It is incongruous and precipitous that the last of the recommendations (physician assisted suicide) is the focus of attention. Until the other 48 recommendations are adequately realised, those seeking euthanasia or physician assisted suicide may well be doing so because they feel they have no other choice open to them.

   Overseas experience has demonstrated that where euthanasia or physician assisted suicide is permitted by law individuals may be less likely to seek appropriate choices for their care, including Palliative Care, out of fear of coercion. The proposed legislation actually infringes upon
the autonomy of those most vulnerable in ambiguous health care and legal systems, and this infringement extends to those with disabilities and mental illness, as well as the aged. Actions should be concentrated on the adequate care of those approaching the end of their lives.

Lastly, recommendation 49 relies on a determination of eligibility for 'voluntary assisted dying' by a selection committee or panel. It follows that the individual’s choice, even if not coerced, will be trumped by the decisions of other people.

3. It is dangerous to try to re-define the criminal law in terms of a definition of ‘unbearable suffering’ and ‘serious and incurable condition’ in order to frame safe guarding provisions. Overseas experience has demonstrated repeatedly that changes to the law as originally framed have been gradually extended or changed, that regulation and reporting is often inadequate, and that definitions of concepts like ‘unbearable suffering’ and ‘serious and incurable condition’ are so arbitrary, that it is impossible to demonstrate that safe-guards would work or be impartially or consistently used. Specific concerns include the re-definitions of what activity is decriminalised, and what constitutes consent and medical practice. Re-definition in these areas represent a seismic shift in how a society views individual lives, the potential harms and impacts to patients, carers/families, and in the role of the clinician.

Consent is a dynamic and relational process, which evolves over time. In our experience, views about and requests for death often change or desist over time or with adequate care. In any case, there should be psychiatric assessment for depression or adjustment problems which are common, not only in those nearing end of life, but also in many of our society, and in those experiencing losses or significant transitions in life. Any right to consent to euthanasia or physician assisted suicide should not be extended to substitute decision makers, nor accepted as part of an Advance Care Directive in a subsequently impaired individual.

4. Patients with life-limiting illness should have the opportunity to experience Palliative Care, not merely to have it offered as an alternative. They should also receive further opinions about management of their medical condition from the appropriate specialties involved in their care, as well as assessment of their social situation.

5. Lastly, clinicians involved in the care of vulnerable individuals, or in the care of those at their end of life in mainstream medicine, should not be involved at any level in the judically sanctioned role or process to end their life. The power differential in the clinician/patient relationship and the transference and un-due influence that may be experienced by individuals in an ongoing therapeutic or dependent relationship cannot be over-estimated.
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