

Submission
No 52

INQUIRY INTO PROVISIONS OF THE VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING BILL 2021

Organisation: Sydney Institute of Palliative Medicine

Date Received: 22 November 2021

22 November, 2022

All correspondence to:
Sydney Institute of Palliative Medicine
Gloucester House L6
Royal Prince Alfred Hospital
Missenden Road
Camperdown, NSW 2050
Australia

Telephone: 61 2 9515 8793
E: slhd-institutepalliativemedicine@health.nsw.gov.au

Executive Committee

Chairperson
A/Prof Ghauri Aggarwal
Concord Hospital

Committee
Dr Jan Maree Davis
St George Hospital

Dr Desi Seccombe
Liverpool Hospital

Dr Melanie Lovell
Greenwich Hospital

Dr Sally Greenaway
Westmead Hospital

Janeen Foffani
Royal Prince Alfred Hospital

Consultants to SIPM:
Prof J Norelle Lickiss
Sydney, Australia

Director
Standing Committee on Law and Justice
Parliament of New South Wales
Macquarie Street
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Director,

We, the executive of the Sydney Institute of Palliative Medicine (SIPM), are writing to you to express our serious concerns regarding the ***Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021***.

Our organisation has for some years played a significant role in the development of palliative medicine as a clinical science and specialist medical field in New South Wales, Australia and internationally. Its activities include registrar training, conducting annual symposia and participating in various international and humanities programs.

As co-ordinator of the palliative medicine training network across the state, SIPM is particularly concerned about how this bill, if passed into law, would impact on both the future development of palliative medicine and how palliative care is practised in this state. It is well recognised that palliative care services in this state are seriously under-resourced. In many parts of New South Wales, there is no access to a palliative medicine physician. People living in those areas need urgent access to expertise in palliative and end of life care.

Current training and the medical ethics that underpin palliative care are directed at providing the best care possible to patients at the end of their life. The legal framework that the bill would establish is specifically designed to create engagements with patients that are anathema to our profession. We are concerned about the impact of such a law on individual patients specifically and society in general. We believe that such a law would have a negative impact on the practice of palliative care in New South Wales.

It is our view that the proposed legislation will compromise greatly the ability of palliative care specialists to deliver good end of life care to patients. In a most fundamental way it interferes with both the relationship and trust between doctor and patient. This can only compromise the ability of doctors to provide the best advice and care to patients experiencing suffering and pain. We submit that if the law is changed to permit doctors to end life, it will alter society's attitude towards the medical profession in a most profound way. Citizens will come to question, if not potentially fear, the very individuals who they believed were professionally trained to care for them. Palliative care should therefore be entirely separate from the activities and delivery of Voluntary Assisted Dying to ensure our patients are confident they will be safe from the threat of having their lives ended prematurely.

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Palliative care can achieve good symptom control in the overwhelming majority of patients. It is our view that so-called voluntary assisted dying is not necessary for symptom relief. It is our observation that distress increases symptom burden and that a focus on death, as happens when euthanasia is considered, increases distress and hence increases pain, breathlessness and other symptoms. In our repeated experience, focusing on living well rather than dying, improves people's wellbeing. It is therefore essential that all patients who are requesting euthanasia are able to access a specialist palliative care service.

We would strongly urge each Member of Parliament to look closely at the proposed legislation and take into account our concerns with regards to the negative impact on society, the future practice and discipline of Palliative Medicine and safety of the vulnerable patients for whom we care.

If there are any matters raised that you would like to discuss further please contact A/Prof Ghauri Aggarwal via email slhd-institutepalliativemedicine@health.nsw.gov.au

Yours faithfully

A/Prof Ghauri Aggarwal
Chair, SIPM
On behalf of the Executive Committee