
Position Statement: Voluntary Assisted Dying

Preamble

In recent years significant debate and change has occurred across most Australian States in relation to Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD). Laws have now been passed in Victoria, Western Australia, South Australia, Tasmania and Queensland. Legislation is currently being debated within New South Wales Parliament. At present, VAD is illegal in the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory. Although VAD laws across States are similar, there are some key differences and so it is important you refer to jurisdictional information to guide practice.

This position statement is designed to provide guiding principles for nurses working across Australia to enable them to provide ongoing optimal care for people with palliative care needs despite changes to laws in relation to VAD.

Background

Palliative Care Nurses Australia Inc. (PCNA) is a national member-based organisation for nurses who are passionate about excellence in palliative care. We provide a unified voice for nurses who deliver, or have an enduring interest in, palliative care policy, practice, research and education. Our goal is to support our members to provide high quality, evidence-based palliative care services for patients at the end of life, and their families.

Palliative Care Nurses Australia believes that:

- VAD is distinct from palliative care;
- Nurses caring for people who are eligible for and considering VAD have a duty of care to ensure that these patients and their families:
 - Continue to have timely access to ongoing support and best evidenced based palliative care;
 - Have their suffering acknowledged and addressed;
 - Are respected to consider VAD and make informed choices about their future care; and
 - Are protected at all times through the maintenance of all necessary safeguards.
- Healthcare organisations must create and maintain an environment in which each nurse can adhere to their moral commitments, while not abandoning the person requesting to hasten their death or their family.
- As health professionals we need to recognise and respect the views of our colleagues.

Background (Cont'd)

- Optimal palliative care nursing involves:
 - advocating for and ensuring all Australians requiring palliative care have access in accordance with their needs and wishes;
 - comprehensive assessment and evidence-based management of the physical, psychological, socio-cultural and spiritual needs of the person and their family;
 - discussing and supporting a person's choice to withhold or withdraw treatments where the potential harm outweighs possible benefit, or it is against the person's expressed wishes;
 - considering the complex and multi-dimensional nature of suffering, and acting to prevent and alleviate it where possible using the best available evidence and interdisciplinary advice and support;
 - respectfully and compassionately acknowledging a person's desire or requests to hasten death in the context of a life limiting illness. This includes seeking to understand the origins of the request, and acknowledging that for a small proportion of people, pain, distress and/or suffering can persist despite the provision of best palliative care;
 - responding to a person's request to hasten death in accordance with:
 - the law and one's conscience
 - professional codes of conduct
 - ethical health care principles
 - best available evidence
 - the unique needs of the person and their family
 - non-abandonment of the person requesting to hasten their death and/or their family; and
 - fostering informed and respectful communication with patients, their families, other health care professionals and the wider community about death, dying, end of life care, and VAD.

Definitions

Palliative Care as defined by the World Health Organization (2021) *'is an approach that improves the quality of life of patients (adults and children) and their families who are facing problems associated with life-threatening illness. It prevents and relieves suffering through the early identification, correct assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, whether physical, psychosocial or spiritual.'* <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/palliative-care>

Voluntary Assisted Dying as defined by the national program, End of Life Law for Clinicians (2022) states that: *'Voluntary assisted dying (VAD) refers to the assistance provided to a person by a health practitioner to end their life. It includes:*

- *'self-administration', where the person takes the VAD medication themselves (this is sometimes called physician-assisted suicide or dying), and*

- 'practitioner administration', where the person is given the medication by a doctor (or in some Australian States, a nurse practitioner or registered nurse) (this is sometimes called voluntary euthanasia).

'Voluntary' indicates that the practice is a voluntary choice of the person, and that they are competent (have capacity) to decide to access VAD.

The term 'voluntary assisted dying' evolved in Australia in recent years following inquiries and parliamentary debates of laws enabling a terminally ill person to seek medical assistance to die. This term is now commonly used in Australia, rather than euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide or dying.

Further information can be accessed via: <https://end-of-life.qut.edu.au/assisteddying#547411>

Additional references:

The nationally funded program 'End of Life Law for Clinicians', provides extensive resources and training modules to assist clinicians: <https://end-of-life.qut.edu.au/> **This includes a specific training module focused on Voluntary Assisted Dying in Australia:** <https://end-of-life.qut.edu.au/assisteddying#547411> (Please note the extensive reference list at the end of this module for important learning resources of relevance to VAD in Australia)

PCA position statement: Palliative Care and Voluntary Assisted Dying (last updated August 2019) voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide <https://palliativecare.org.au/statement/palliative-care-and-voluntary-assisted-dying-position-statement-2019/>

ANZSPM position statement: The Practice of Euthanasia and Physician-Assisted Suicide (Last updated: November 2021)
[file:///C:/Users/61410/Downloads/ANZSPM Position Statement Euthanasia Physician Assisted Dying.pdf](file:///C:/Users/61410/Downloads/ANZSPM%20Position%20Statement%20Euthanasia%20Physician%20Assisted%20Dying.pdf)

The Australian College of Nursing position statement: Voluntary Assisted Dying (Last updated November 2021) <https://www.acn.edu.au/policy/position-statements>