

8 February 2018

Submission on: End of Life Choice Bill

To: The Justice Committee Secretariat, Justice Committee
Parliament Buildings, WELLINGTON 6160

From: Bridget Quirke

I wish to make the following general comments:

I OPPOSE the End of Life Choice Bill and legalisation of euthanasia or assisted suicide in New Zealand, because I strongly value our society's promotion of and right to life. The Bill of Rights 1990 states our fundamental right to life, and any change in the law diminishing the value of life is of huge concern to me.

Any law change that puts at risk the long-standing legal and medical traditions of our country in upholding the right to life has far-reaching, long-term consequences for public safety.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide effectively require the state to condone in advance the death of some citizens. This implies that some people have a lesser claim to life than others, and I have a grave concern that changing the law in our country would send a message that the lives of some are not worth living. This proposed End of Life Choice Bill is unnecessary and unsafe.

I am also concerned at the effects this law change would have on the way society thinks about caring for people. There is a major social justice issue at stake here, in protecting the vulnerable. Our country invests huge amounts of time and money (as it should do!) protecting the vulnerable in our society - the sick, elderly, mentally ill, young people (including millions of dollars spent trying to prevent youth suicide). Why would society suddenly turn the tables and allow the legalised killing of certain members of society? Especially when there is such an enormous scope for potential abuse? Vulnerable people may feel they are a burden on relatives or the tax-paid health system, and very easily, with state-sanctioned killing, a 'right' to die could become a 'duty' to die. As a compassionate society, I do not wish our nation to become one in which people feel pressured in any way that their life is threatened by what some may see as a legal 'obligation' to be killed. I believe that it would be wrong for sick people to be put in a position where they have to explain why they don't want to choose to die. Young New Zealanders may take the message that it is 'reasonable' to take one's own life, and the efforts that go into suicide prevention in this country would be completely marginalised.

The End of Life Choice Bill provides that Euthanasia and Assisted Suicide be available for those with "grievous and irremediable medical conditions", and alarmingly this would include people with conditions such as depression or any form of disability. It would also inevitably expand to children with mental health issues or those unable to give consent at all. There is no evidence in the draft in of this Bill that any safeguards would be effective at protecting such members of our society. The potential harm of endangering many other members of society far outweighs any calls for the right to end life.

A great problem with euthanasia being legalised is that it also goes against medical ethics. It is a crucially important fact that the New Zealand Medical Association as well as the World Medical Association oppose the legalisation of euthanasia. I understand that the legislation being proposed would make medical professionals have to be involved in the assisted suicide of another person, and even if they object they would still have to refer that person on to another person who would do the job. It is unfair and I believe unethical to ask medical professionals to kill or be involved in killing, rather than caring for patients. I also have serious concerns with the proposed legislation

regarding the cause of death that would be put on the person's death certificate after assisted suicide. I understand that the person's underlying medical condition that was causing their illness would be documented as the cause of death, rather than the factual 'death by lethal injection' or 'assisted suicide'. This documentation of cause of death would have huge ramifications for the accurate reporting of euthanasia and assisted suicide. This could potentially skew statistics and reporting of the facts, and in future could enable lawmakers to justify further broadening of the scope of euthanasia to include more and more vulnerable members of society.

I also have a problem with euthanasia being described as a matter of an 'individual's choice'. It is not an individual choice when it legally would have to involve many other people in the actual death. The risk to other people's lives in making this a legal precedent is too great, and the fear is that there is no way of knowing whether a person's choice would be truly voluntary. Upholding the choice of a determined few will effectively take away the choice to live for much larger numbers of vulnerable people

I am concerned at the use of the word 'compassion' in polls and reports about euthanasia and assisted suicide. The use of this word makes people think that euthanasia or assisted suicide is the only way of alleviating a person's pain and suffering - that there is no compassionate alternative to killing the person. The reality is completely different of course, we are lucky that in New Zealand we have world-class palliative care, and this should be what our Health Ministry is focussing on: the promotion of health and wellbeing, not death. We have great expertise and means to care for those with progressive illnesses in New Zealand, in ways which afford them compassion and dignity at times of great suffering.

Recommendations:

I recommend that the law in New Zealand should NOT be changed to legalise euthanasia or assisted suicide in any way. The Health Ministry should please focus on its aim: "to promote and protect the health of all New Zealanders". Legalising the killing of certain citizens does not, in my opinion, come within that remit, and nor should it. Such law change would be a dangerous precedent for a just society, and one that would be very difficult to ever retract once enacted. The true mark of a compassionate society is the depth of care and support offered to those who are suffering and the degree to which it protects the most vulnerable. I recommend that the New Zealand government should alleviate those concerned with suffering by further promotion and funding of good, readily available palliative care and counselling support.

Sincerely
Bridget Quirke