

Submission to Senate Inquiry into Suicide in Australia

In this submission I would like, if I may, to draw attention to an example of inconsistency in respective Australian legislation that pertains to the termination of life - and suicide (under certain conditions).

On the one hand, abortion is legal – even when the fetus is healthy and there is no risk of harm to the pregnant woman should she proceed to a full term delivery.

Termination of human life, when it applies to ending an unwanted or inconvenient pregnancy is legal, safe, and freely available.

The Better Health website of the Victorian government states that in 1990 “an estimated 23% of all known pregnancies in Australia were terminated”. This same website also states that “abortion is one of the most common surgical procedures in the country”, and “Numerous studies have shown that the majority of Australians support the idea of safe and legal abortions”.

In contrast to the termination of pregnancy legislation, and although suicide is also not illegal, any elderly individual who has reached the stage where for them their quality of life has become a distant and fading memory, is explicitly denied access to the means of a clean, safe and peaceful termination of their own life.

Indeed, if such an individual even attempts to prepare for a peaceful end at a time of their own choosing and at their own expense, they risk prosecution as does any compassionate individual who responds to their pleas for help and assists them.

Please may I offer the following example to illustrate my argument of a glaring – and I suggest also cruel - double standard in our legislation:

While training as a student nurse during the early 1960's in England part of my time was spent on the gynecological ward.

One day, a girl of 16 years was admitted as an emergency. She was in shock, suffering excruciating pain and drifting in and out of consciousness. On discovering she was pregnant and dreading the response of her parents when they learned of her shameful state, she had self administered a carbolic douche. Nuns from a nearby convent also did their nursing training at the same hospital, and because of their own religious beliefs they all refused to attend to that young girl's needs. They even looked in the opposite direction each time they passed her bed! That poor girl's intolerable suffering continued for a little over a week before she died.

Social attitudes are thankfully more tolerant these days. Legislated provision for safe termination of pregnancy has eliminated the need for back-yard abortions, and society largely forbids the imposing of one person's strongly held beliefs onto others. In most respects legislation actually protects everyone's right to exercise free choice with the guiding criteria being that an individual's choices do not infringe upon the rights of others. And yet, our legislation reflects a most unfortunate, dismissive stance in response to the earnestly expressed wishes of so many elderly citizens who seek to determine their own fate and this, to me, is reminiscent of those nuns almost 50 years ago. It is reminiscent insofar as legislation is imposing the values and beliefs of some onto everybody – including those who are utterly helpless.

Please, Senators, I very respectfully suggest that it is well past the time when each elderly and irreversibly ailing individual be allowed what is essentially the 'same type' (of) choice that readily accommodates the wishes of pregnant young women.

I also request it!

Thank you very much for your consideration of this submission.