

POSITION STATEMENT – Palliative Care and Voluntary Assisted Dying

Palliative Care NSW Inc (PCNSW) is the peak body for palliative care in NSW, representing the interests of health care professionals, people with a life-limiting illness and their carers and families. PCNSW is affiliated with a member of Palliative Care Australia (PCA) and works to ensure that all people in NSW, wherever they live, have access to quality palliative care support and services.

PCNSW supports the position of PCA that the decision whether or not to legislate voluntary assisted dying is one for governments. PCNSW neither advocates for, nor argues against the legislation of voluntary assisted dying.

Our position is to clearly define the difference between palliative care and VAD and to promote the role of palliative care in a person’s end of life experience.

Definitions

Palliative care. Affirms life and regards dying as a normal process that intends neither to hasten nor postpone death. It improves the quality of life of patients and their families facing the problems associated with life-threatening illness, through the prevention and relief of suffering by means of early identification and impeccable assessment and treatment of pain and other problems, physical, psychosocial and spiritual.

Voluntary assisted dying. Medical practitioners may prescribe and potentially directly administer an approved substance for the purpose of causing death where the person meets the eligibility criteria outlined in the relevant legislation and has sought this outcome voluntarily.

PCNSW holds the view that voluntary assisted dying is not part of palliative care practice. We believe that:

- If palliative care health professionals or organisations choose to offer and provide voluntary assisted dying for their patients with life-limiting illness, this is a practice separate from palliative care.
- In Australia, an individual’s choice to explore voluntary assisted dying should never be a choice based on a lack of access to palliative care.
- Palliative care is explicitly recognised under the human right to health. Every Australian living with a life-limiting illness should always have equitable access to quality needs-based palliative care at any point in their illness journey, with timely referral to specialist palliative care if required.
- Palliative care is person and family-centred care with the primary goal to ensure patient safety and to optimise the quality of life, as palliative care helps people live their life as fully and as comfortably as possible when living with a life-limiting illness.
- When aligned with a person’s preferences, withdrawing or refusing life sustaining treatment does not constitute voluntary assisted dying.

Respecting the workforce which cares for people with life-limiting illness

PCNSW recognises that health professionals providing palliative care may be asked for information about voluntary assisted dying or receive direct requests from people with life-limiting illness to access voluntary assisted dying.

- All people providing palliative care should be supported to ensure people with life-limiting illness in their care receive safe, compassionate, competent care regardless of whether they seek information about, or referral to, services that may provide voluntary assisted dying.
- It is the right of health professionals providing palliative care to make appropriate judgements about whether they will be involved in voluntary assisted dying based on the legal context and their personal ethics and beliefs and those of the organisation/s by which they are employed.
- All people working in palliative care should be treated respectfully and demonstrate professional behaviour towards colleagues and co-workers regardless of their views on voluntary assisted dying and the decision to exercise their right to conscientiously object or conscientiously participate in any aspect of voluntary assisted dying.

With the introduction of the VAD Bill into NSW parliament, PCNSW hereby submits the following recommendations:

- Equity of information re services available to people with a life limiting illness in the face of VAD to ensure all people have access to balanced information, support and the opportunity to make informed choices, in relation to their end of life care.
- Compulsory palliative care education at an undergraduate level for all medical, nursing, allied health and pharmacy students to ensure a consistent baseline competency in palliative care pain and symptom assessment and management together with the communication skills required for caring for people with life-limiting illness and their families and carers
- Further investment in volunteer services to encourage and support the provision of palliative care throughout whole of community
- Increased support for specialist interdisciplinary palliative care in all care settings including community and RACF which will ease pressure on hospitals. There are not enough GP home visiting options and not enough Palliative Care Nurse Practitioners
- Increased support for specialist palliative care multidisciplinary consult teams in hospitals across NSW
- A substantial investment in planning for the future to ensure equity of access to quality palliative care services in metropolitan, regional, rural and remote settings
- An investment in PCNSW as the peak representative body to ensure residents of NSW have a focal point to initially engage with and gain appropriate palliative care information

Palliative Care Australia has developed [Voluntary Assisted Dying in Australia: Guiding principles for those providing care to people living with a life-limiting illness](#) to assist health professionals, care workers and volunteers who are providing care to people living with a life-limiting illness, or working in or engaging with organisations providing any level of palliative care.