



Palliative Care

Palliative care addresses the physical, psychosocial and spiritual needs of people with a life-limiting illness, as well as bereavement for families and carers. A progressive or life-limiting illness means an illness that is going to get worse, and which will eventually shorten the person's life.

Palliative care recognises the unique needs of a person who is approaching and reaching the end of their life. Palliative care aims to improve the quality of life for patients, their families and carers by helping the person live as well and as comfortably as possible.

NSW Voluntary Assisted Dying Act

The Parliament of New South Wales passed the [**Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2022**](#) (the Act) on 19 May 2022. The Act will allow eligible people the choice to access voluntary assisted dying in NSW from 28 November 2023.

Voluntary assisted dying means an eligible person can ask for medical help to end their life. The person must be in the late stages of an advanced disease, illness or medical condition. They must also be experiencing suffering they find unbearable.

If a person meets all the criteria and the steps set out in the law are followed, they can take or be given a voluntary assisted dying substance to bring about their death at a time they choose. The substance must be prescribed by an authorised voluntary assisted dying practitioner.

'Voluntary' means the choice must be the person's own. The person must have decision making capacity throughout the entire process to access voluntary assisted dying.

Palliative Care New South Wales (PCNSW) recognises that the topic of voluntary assisted dying raises difficult and complex ethical issues, and that there is a broad spectrum of opinion on, and support or opposition to, VAD within the community. PCNSW represents health professionals, carers and consumers, and notes that this diversity of opinion is also reflected within the palliative care community. With an ageing population and rising chronic illness, NSW needs greater investment in palliative care and more support for the workforce that cares for people toward the end of their life.

Palliative Care NSW believes that:

- A person's decision to seek information about, or access to, voluntary assisted dying has no impact on the person's access to high-quality palliative care.
- If palliative care health professionals or organisations choose to offer and provide VAD for their patients with life-limiting illness, this is a practice separate from palliative care. However, people may choose to receive palliative care throughout the VAD process.
- In NSW, an individual's choice to explore VAD 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 NSW resident 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 goals of ensuring patient psychological safety and optimising quality of life. Palliative care helps people live their life as fully and comfortably as possible when living with a life-limiting illness.
- When aligned with a person's preferences, withdrawing or refusing life sustaining treatment (including withholding artificial hydration) or providing strong medication(s) to relieve suffering, does not constitute VAD.

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 VAD or receive direct requests from people with life-limiting illness to access VAD.

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 VAD.

It is the right of health professionals providing palliative care to make appropriate judgements about whether they will be involved in VAD based on their personal ethics and beliefs and the policies of their employer/s.

All people working in palliative care should be treated respectfully and demonstrate professional behaviour towards colleagues and co-workers regardless of their views on VAD, and regardless of any decision to exercise their right to conscientiously object to or conscientiously participate in any aspect of VAD.

Palliative Care NSW calls for:

- Training in advanced communication skills that promote respectful dialogue in end-of-life and advance care planning discussions with people. The palliative care workforce supports people with life-limiting illness by enabling exploration of the complex social, spiritual, cultural, psychological, emotional and physical aspects of their care preferences.
- Allowance for healthcare professionals to have time to access clinical and/or professional supervision and self-care support, noting that healthcare professionals can experience high levels of distress when involved with the process of VAD.
- Compulsory and consistent palliative care education and training for all medical, nursing, allied health and pharmacy students as part of undergraduate curricula including clinical, legal, and ethical considerations. This will ensure a consistent baseline competency in palliative care pain and symptom management, together with the

communication skills required for caring for people with life-limiting illness, their families and carers.

- Ongoing, consistent education, training and refresher courses to health clinicians currently employed in the health sector.

Additional Information / Links:

[NSW Ministry of Health Voluntary Assisted Dying Clinical Practice Handbook](#)
[Palliative Care Australia VAD Guiding Principles](#)