

Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry into Voluntary Assisted Dying

Submissions to the Queensland Parliamentary “Inquiry into aged care, end-of-life and palliative care and voluntary assisted dying” closed on the 15th of April. The Queensland Baptist Board made a submission on the voluntary assisted dying aspect of the inquiry. Aged care and palliative care are certainly important issues, and they are related to voluntary assisted dying. Currently there is a Federal Royal Commission looking into aged care, so it was somewhat of surprise to see the Queensland Parliament duplicating this effort.

Provision of aged care and palliative care are not controversial in themselves. The concerns are that provision of both has been inadequate and at times inappropriate. In particular, requests by people for assistance in ending their lives decrease markedly where there is readily accessible high-quality palliative care.

In all probability the focus of any legislation coming out of the inquiry will be on “voluntary assisted dying”, which is really a euphemism for euthanasia. So the focus of the submission made by the board was on euthanasia. The submission borrowed heavily from a 2014 paper prepared by Australian Baptist Ministries, particularly in eleven points we made under the heading, “What we believe about voluntary assisted dying”. These are the points,

1. Queensland Baptists believe that all people are made in the image of God, so human lives are precious and of intrinsic worth. The value of life is not diminished by age, lack of productivity or illness.
2. This does not mean that prolonging life with futile or burdensome treatment is an ethical necessity.
3. It does however mean that intentionally ending life to avoid suffering of any kind is morally unacceptable.
4. Treatment which intends to reduce suffering is acceptable, even if it may hasten death. This differs only in degree from some other medical treatments which also have side-effects, and although intended to preserve life or reduce pain, do sometimes cause or hasten death.
5. We believe the state has an obligation to protect people from harm, especially those people who are elderly, disabled or otherwise vulnerable to abuse. Deliberately taking a person’s life is the ultimate harm.
6. We believe that legalising voluntary assisted dying will increasingly promote mistrust between patients and their health practitioners, and patients and their families. The community’s view of medical practitioners and other involved health practitioners, especially among the vulnerable, will change so that they are seen as potential agents of death as well as health.
7. We are concerned that legalising voluntary assisted dying will have unintended consequences, in particular the devaluing of those who see themselves (or are seen by society) as being of low value.
8. Similarly we are concerned that governments, in response to voluntary assisted dying, and we trust unconsciously, may reduce spending on end of life care with their budgets benefiting from the consequent reduction in health care costs.

9. We believe that it is impossible to ensure that “assisted dying” is always truly voluntary. Abuse of the elderly occurs, and older people will be bullied into “voluntary” assisted dying. To believe otherwise is to ignore the accumulating evidence of elder abuse.

10. Further, with legalisation of voluntary assisted dying, people’s view of the state and community morality will change. Whereas at present the state overrides people’s autonomy when necessary to prevent people from harming themselves, the state will be come to be seen as prioritising autonomy over preventing harm. This is a highly significant change, and one which will have unintended consequences, some of which are unpredictable.

11. We therefore call on the Queensland Parliament to reject any legislation which legalises voluntary assisted dying.”

There are two ethical principles at play. The first is, do no harm. The bedrock for this is that all people are made in the image of God, as explained in point one. In James 3:9 people are condemned simply for cursing a fellow human made in the image of God. This should make us think before we contemplate criticising someone on social media.

The second principle is autonomy. This is a principal Baptists value highly. Believer’s baptism is founded on principal that each person has to decide for themselves to follow Jesus. However, when the principal of autonomy is taken to the extreme of allowing a person to harm themselves, we argue that the first principal, do no harm, takes precedence over the person’s autonomy, their choice to do harm.

The precedence of “do no harm” over “autonomy” is recognised in law. When a person with depression wishes to take their own life, the law allows health professionals to detain them and treat them without their consent. Legalising euthanasia reverses this. It places the principal of autonomy above the principal of “do no harm”.

Another issue with euthanasia is that creates a category of persons whose lives are legally recognised as not worth living. Disability advocates have recognised the “thin edge of the wedge” here, and in the Netherlands and Belgium lethal drugs have been administered without the person’s consent. That is to people who were unable to consent, because they had a disability like dementia. For a passionate discussion of disability and euthanasia by comedian Liz Carr see <https://youtu.be/KdO8tXBo0bI>.

There is an obvious link between abortion and euthanasia. In both, there are humans whose lives are deemed to be not worth living. And in both, the principal of autonomy or “choice” takes precedence over the principal, do no harm.

As followers of Jesus we believe in the sanctity of human life because all, regardless of race or religion, ability or disability, age or infirmity, all of us are made in the image of God. So we oppose euthanasia.

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For the full submission see <https://www.qb.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Qld-Baptists-Response-to-Voluntary-Assisted-Dying-Parliamentary-Enquiry-v4a.pdf>

An academic article which was very helpful in preparing our submission was
Physician-Assisted Suicide and Euthanasia: Emerging Issues From a Global Perspective.

Sprung C, Somerville MA, Radbruch L et al *Journal of Palliative Care*, 2018, 33(4):197-203.

This can be found online at https://www.researchgate.net/publication/325510714_Physician-Assisted_Suicide_and_Euthanasia_Emerging_Issues_From_a_Global_Perspective/download.

Special thanks to Rev Murray Lean (who is also a registered medical practitioner) and Rev Dr Peter Francis for reviewing the submission for the board.