



Most Rev Philip Wilson DD JCL
Archbishop of Adelaide
Archbishop's Office
GPO BOX 1364
Adelaide 5001
South Australia
39 Wakefield Street
Adelaide SA 5000

Telephone: (08) 8210 8108
Facsimile: (08) 8223 2307
Email: phwilson@adelaide.catholic.org.au

November 11, 2010

People who are dying have a right to be cared for.

In South Australia and other Australian jurisdictions, parliamentary debates are again taking place with a view to legalising euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

This should be of great concern to all Australians because of the far-reaching ramifications for our society, our health professionals, individuals and the most vulnerable people in the community. Euthanasia challenges the accepted understanding of the importance of human life and impacts on the way we care for people who are dying.

As Catholics we must take a stand and speak out against the proponents of euthanasia, and to do so effectively we must be armed with all the facts.

For example, the bill currently before the South Australian Parliament claims to be making provisions for the "legal regulation" of medical killing – suggesting the aim of the bill is merely to bring order to a practice that is currently prevalent and unregulated. Such a suggestion is groundless and is a slur on doctors, implying that they are routinely killing patients in the guise of relieving pain by administering large doses of pain killers. There is a profound difference between intending pain relief and intending death. In good palliative care, the intention is to relieve the patient's distress.

It has also been stated in Parliament that the bill is based on the "compassionate principle that no person with a terminal illness, or anyone who is suffering from any illness or injury to an extent that it makes life intolerable, should be forced by law to continue that suffering." These sentiments no doubt reflect a compassionate intention behind this bill, but they are, by omission, erroneous. It is already possible for people to indicate their preference not to undergo treatment that is burdensome or futile – and you can either appoint a medical agent or write down your wishes in case at some later time you are incapable of making decisions about your medical treatment. We also have world-class palliative care services and pain relief is highly available and sophisticated today, unlike 30 years ago when euthanasia was introduced in The Netherlands.

Another misconception about euthanasia is based on many people's fear of death, particularly a long and painful one. As a result, euthanasia can be seen as a quick-fix solution to the frightening prospect of death, but often as people face death, as many palliative care workers will tell you, the desire to live remains incredibly strong. A dignified death is one in which we are loved and cared for during our dying process. It is one in which nature takes its course without burdensome and futile treatments; one in which we are given as much pain relief as is necessary, even if it shortens our life, but never with the intention of killing. All the elements for a dignified death exist in Australia today and are protected in law – they are our moral and legal right.

We have a responsibility to care for those who are dying and to protect the rights of the vulnerable. This requires each one of us to take a stand on this issue. After fear and ignorance, the next most dangerous attributes we can have are complacency and silence. The risks of not taking a stand and allowing the legislation to pass are great. Imagine a society that involves regulators and courts making judgements about the quality of people's lives.

The majority of people in Australia – both Catholics and non-Catholics – oppose capital punishment because it involves the systematic killing of a human being, and potentially the death of an innocent person. The same concerns apply to legalised euthanasia.

As His Holiness Pope Benedict has stated:

“Euthanasia is a false solution to the drama of suffering, a solution unworthy of man. Indeed the true response cannot be to put someone to death, however ‘kindly’, but rather to witness to the love that helps people to face their pain and agony in a human way.”

Let me conclude by urging you to email or contact your local Member of Parliament and members of the Legislative Council voicing your opposition to the proposed legislation. In doing so, let it be clear that the Catholic Church supports the development of advanced directives, is clear on the right to refuse futile and burdensome treatment and supports excellence in health care through our many excellent health services around Australia. By doing so we ensure a just, moral and ethical society; support for voluntary euthanasia opens a clear pathway to exactly the opposite.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Philip Wilson" with a small cross symbol to the left and a period to the right.

Most Rev Philip Wilson DD JCL
Archbishop of Adelaide