



To the people of the Catholic Archdiocese of Melbourne

Statement on Euthanasia

There is a renewed push in Victoria and many other parts of Australia for euthanasia and assisted suicide to be legalised. Misplaced compassion leads some to call for euthanasia. While it is never easy facing the end of life of a loved one, we cannot support the legalisation of euthanasia however it is described.

Euthanasia and assisted suicide are the opposite of care and represent the abandonment of older and dying persons. Instead, we encourage all people of goodwill, to respond to this new challenge with truth and compassion. I join the Anglican Church of Australia in affirming that our task is to protect, nurture and sustain life to the best of our ability.

Advocates of euthanasia and assisted suicide are mounting a new campaign for far-reaching change to Victoria's laws on euthanasia and assisted suicide. If the State government were to ask the Law Reform Commission to review the Medical Treatment Act, there is a serious danger that the Commission would follow previous practice in relation to laws such as abortion and after a brief period of public consultation recommend radical change to the legislation without consultation on the proposed changes. With these laws there was little time or opportunity for public consultation, debate or reflection and the laws were introduced to the Parliament by the Government on the basis that it would not allow amendments.

Since the Northern Territory's brief experiment with euthanasia in 1996, euthanasia advocates have introduced numerous bills into state parliaments around Australia all of which have been rejected. Why? Because when parliamentarians take the time to debate the issue fully and to consider all the consequences properly they realise that to decriminalise euthanasia and assisted suicide would threaten the lives of other vulnerable people.

The proposals if enacted would allow some people to be treated differently under the law such that their lives could be taken at their request. The impact of a law of that kind on those people who fit the description is to make them vulnerable particularly if they feel that they are a burden to others.

The experience of the Netherlands confirms just how far such a mentality can spread with pressure to increase the scope of the law so that it includes not just those with terminal illness and unrelievable suffering, but also people who suffer from depression, those who cannot make their own decisions, and even children.

As Pope Benedict reminded us recently, "the Church has always had great respect for the elderly" and the dying and this has been expressed practically in Catholic health and aged care, especially in hospice services.

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As medical advances increasingly lead to a longer life for many people, we should view older people as a blessing for society rather than a problem. Each generation has much to teach the generation that follows it. We should therefore see care of the elderly as repayment of a debt of gratitude, as a part of a culture of love and care.

The Catholic community already does much to care through our network of hospices, hospitals and other services. I call on the Catholic community and people of good will to continue to care for the frail elderly, the sick and the dying, at every stage of life. I ask you to continue to journey with those who are sick and in pain, to visit them, and ensure they have appropriate care and support and pain management and most of all someone to remain close to them.

I thank those healthcare professionals and palliative care specialists, nurses, doctors and specialist, psychologists, pain management teams, pastoral carers, religious, volunteers and others who work every day to reduce psychological pain, social and spiritual suffering, in positive and life affirming ways.

It is an uplifting and inspiring experience to observe the love and care of those who work with and support the ill and the dying in their final days of life. I encourage the community to do more to support those often unseen heroes who stand in solidarity and love those who are suffering.

I ask the Parliament to put its energy and creative talents, into positive supports, rather than taking the negative path towards euthanasia or assisted suicide. I call on our parliaments to increase their support for aged care and palliative care programs.

I ask the community to continue to love and care for those who are sick and suffering rather than abandoning them to euthanasia or supporting them to suicide. Our ability to care says much about the strength of our society.

If there is a vote on euthanasia in the next term of the state Parliament, as predicted, each member will most likely be given a conscience vote. As you consider which candidate to vote for, ask them what their position is on euthanasia and assisted suicide.

Yours sincerely in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Denis J. Hall". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

ARCHBISHOP OF MELBOURNE

5 October 2010