

VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA / ASSISTED SUICIDE

Introduction

Voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide is illegal in all areas of Australia. Over the years, there have been a number of unsuccessful attempts to introduce legislation to either legalise or decriminalise voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide. In 1995, for example, the Northern Territory's legislative assembly passed the *Rights of the Terminally Ill Act 1995*,⁽¹⁾ clearing the way for the legalisation of voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide in the Northern Territory. The Act that came into effect on 1 July 1996 was subsequently overturned by the Federal Government (*Euthanasia Laws Act 1997*).⁽²⁾

In recognition of the significance of changing social attitudes towards the ethics of life and death, and the potential impact of these changes on the profession and the practice of nursing, Royal College of Nursing, Australia canvassed views from the nursing profession on the issue of voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide. This position statement acknowledges and respects the diversity of views of College members on voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide.

Euthanasia, voluntary euthanasia and assisted suicide are defined as:

- **Euthanasia:** refers to a deliberate act undertaken by one person with the intention of either painlessly putting to death or failing to prevent death from natural causes in cases of terminal illness or irreversible coma of another person.⁽³⁾
- **Voluntary euthanasia:** refers to the termination of life at the request of the person killed;⁽⁴⁾
- **Assisted suicide:** refers to the act of intentionally killing oneself with the assistance of another who provides the knowledge, means or both.⁽⁵⁾

This position statement should be read in conjunction with the Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia.⁽⁵⁾

Royal College of Nursing, Australia believes that:

Voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide is illegal in all areas of Australia. Each state and territory has its own legislation.

Those who practise active voluntary euthanasia can be prosecuted for murder or manslaughter and those who assist a person to suicide face lengthy prison sentences.

Nurses have a professional responsibility to stay reliably informed about the ethical, legal, cultural and clinical implications of voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide.

Nurses have a primary responsibility to provide quality palliative care to dying clients, their carers and their significant others.

Nurses need to recognise and accept that they may work in a team of health care professionals who have differing ethical views about life and death.

Each nurse's conscientious beliefs concerning the issue of voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide ought to be respected and supported.

Rationale

Members of the College are themselves from a variety of cultural, social, political, economic and religious backgrounds. They are employed in various health care settings, for example, in hospitals, residential and aged care homes, community health care settings, private homes, hospices, general practices, and universities; and across all geographical settings from metropolitan to remote areas. It is inevitable that nurses will encounter a diversity of viewpoints on voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide so it is important that they stay informed about the ethical, legal, cultural and clinical aspects of euthanatic practices.

Through their care of very ill people and their families, and as members of a multidisciplinary team, nurses are exposed to issues pertaining to voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide and should be aware of the impact and implications which relate to their professional practice.

Royal College of Nursing, Australia resolves to:

Promote this statement to all members of the College and seek their support in encouraging nurses to:

- Respond, as appropriate, to social and legal policy initiatives in all Australian States and Territories to ensure that a nursing perspective is represented in any law or social policy changes aimed at legalising the options of voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide;
- Respond, as appropriate, to public discussions on voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide to ensure that the realities and lived experiences of nurses working with clients who are suffering are portrayed adequately, accurately and in a way that informs the public;
- Advocate for:
 - the provision of palliative care and excellent care of the dying to be equitably accessible across Australia;
 - the role of the nurse to be clearly described in relevant social policy and legal acts / statutes and not merely subsumed under the practice of medicine;
 - the role of the nurse to be prescribed in accordance with the accepted philosophy and ethics of the profession and practice of nursing; and
 - nurses not being given responsibilities that exceed their legal authority to practice.
- Assist in the dissemination of information on voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide to enable the broader nursing profession to become informed about the varying ethical, legal, cultural and clinical dimensions of voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide.

References

1. *Rights of the Terminally Ill Act 1995* (NT)
2. *Euthanasia Laws Act 1997* (Commonwealth)
3. World Health Organisation 2004 *A Glossary of Terms from Community Health Care and Services for Older Persons Ageing and Health Technical Report Vol. 5*
4. Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1996 *Human rights and euthanasia* Occasional Paper
5. Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council 2002 *Code of Ethics for Nurses in Australia*, ANMC, Canberra

Further Reading

1. International Council of Nurses 2000 *Nurses' Role in Providing Care to Dying Patients and their Families* Position Statement www.icn.ch

Authorised by the Board of Directors of Royal College of Nursing, Australia

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MISSION STATEMENT

To benefit the health of the community through promotion and recognition of professional excellence in nursing.

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