

Legalisation of VAD in Australia: how did we get here and how do we respond?

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I am a Christian layperson who is particularly interested in the topic of Christian engagement with culture.

In this short article, I make some observations about changes in Australians' (and other Westerners') worldview and culture that are linked to greater acceptance of voluntary euthanasia. After that I offer some brief thoughts on how we might best act as salt and light in this new era of legalised 'voluntary assisted dying' (VAD).

Key worldview and cultural changes that have helped to pave the way for voluntary euthanasia

- As scientific knowledge and wealth have increased in our society, so has average life expectancy.¹ Because there are fewer deaths, and because people who die tend to be cared for in their final days not in their homes by members of their family but in institutions by specially trained staff, there is less familiarity with—and greater fear of—dying and death, especially among the young.²
- As wealth has made us more confident that our basic human needs (e.g. for food, clothing and shelter) would be met, we have placed greater importance on 'higher order' needs like health, esteem, control, meaning and fulfilment.³
- Although we live longer, our culture idolises youthfulness and ability, which shapes us to view with dread the loss of ability to care for ourselves, manage our own affairs, and participate in our favourite activities, which often accompany serious illness and old age.⁴
- As many people in our society have grown wealthier and more confident in managing their affairs, they have felt less need for God.⁵ They function as if God doesn't exist;

1 Australian Institute for Health and Welfare, 'Deaths in Australia,' <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/life-expectancy-death/deaths-in-australia/contents/life-expectancy>, accessed 14 August 2023.

2 Hal Swerissen and Stephen Duckett, *Dying Well*, Grattan Institute Report No. 2014-10 (Carlton, VIC: Grattan Institute, 2014), 4, 11–12, available at <https://grattan.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/815-dying-well.pdf>, accessed 14 August 2023.

3 This observation is basic to Maslow's hierarchy of human needs.

4 See, for example, Pope Francis, 'Catechesis on old age: 1. The grace of time and the bond between age and life,' Paul VI Audience Hall, 23 February 2022, <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20220223-udienza-generale.html>, accessed 14 August 2023.

5 Jesus identified this tendency in his own day, illustrating it with his parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13–21).

humans are in charge and humans will decide for themselves what is true, right and good.⁶ But God's absence from people's lives impairs their ability to cope with suffering; they typically regard it as meaningless and pointless. Why not avoid suffering if it can be avoided?

- The value our culture has come to place on individual freedom and autonomy is evidenced by the invention and pursuit of new 'rights', including the right to seek medical assistance to end one's life in certain circumstances.⁷ Self-interest makes the proponents of alleged rights such as the right to euthanasia reluctant to acknowledge the wider ramifications of giving them 'legal blessing'.

Opportunities for Christians to be salt and light in this new context

We are in the early stages of a new era of voluntary assisted dying (VAD) as a state-approved practice. It is naïve to think that in a culture that prizes individual freedom and autonomy and dreads debility and dying, the current strict eligibility criteria, safeguards, and conscience rights for medical professionals will remain in place permanently and be strictly and respectfully observed.

Recent research in Canada, a country that is culturally similar to Australia, and where medical assistance in dying (or MAiD) became legal in 2016, shows how attitudes to euthanasia among those who grow up with it can become disturbingly permissive.⁸ Among Canadians aged 18–34, 41% agreed that people should have access to MAiD for poverty, 41% for homelessness, 55% for mental illness, 57% for inability to access medical treatment, and 60% for disability. A significant proportion of young Canadians apparently see MAiD as a solution to a much more diverse set of problems than was originally envisaged. Their narrow focus on consent makes them blind to the appalling nature of what they are contemplating.

Christians might readily acknowledge the attractiveness of the option of avoiding a slow and painful death. But we also recognise that

- we are not isolated individuals, that what we do affects others;
- we do not 'belong to ourselves', we belong to God; our lives are a gift from Him; and
- we are confronted by the substantial obstacle of God's prohibition of murder.

We will therefore do well to think about what being salt and light means in this context. Here are some of my thoughts on this question.

6 Setting ourselves up in God's place as the arbiters of right and wrong is the story of the Fall (Genesis 3).

7 For a critique of self-determination as it relates to voluntary euthanasia, see Daniel Callahan, 'When self-determination runs amok,' *Hastings Center Report* 22, no. 2 (March/April 1992), 52–55, full text available at <https://users.manchester.edu/Facstaff/SSNaragon/Online/texts/235/Callahan,%20Self-Determination.pdf>, accessed 14 August 2023.

8 See the research data tables at https://researchco.ca/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Tables_MAiD_CAN_05May2023.pdf, accessed 14 August 2023.

Being salt

Being salt means preventing moral decay, inhibiting sin's power to destroy lives. In our context I think it means:

- Taking action to ensure that people with terminal or incurable diseases and other distressing conditions are treated with dignity and their suffering is made more bearable, so that as few people as possible resort to VAD.
- Reminding ourselves and others that VAD is not just a 'private' act; the wider consequences are real and must be acknowledged, e.g. for people who might be conceived, or conceive of themselves, as being burdens or as having lives not worth living, and for medical professionals and healthcare institutions and how they are perceived.
- Regarding VAD as a regrettable choice, a sign of our failure as a community.
- Challenging talk that frames the provision of VAD (i.e. the administration of a lethal poison) as 'loving' and/or 'compassionate'.
- Challenging talk that frames the choice of VAD as a 'noble sacrifice' or as 'loving' or 'compassionate', e.g. because it relieves others of the burden of providing care, or because it relieves relatives of the distress of witnessing a loved one's protracted decline and associated suffering (this includes citing John 15:13 in support of VAD).
- Defending the medical professions from attempts to force them to cooperate in the provision of VAD, and defending a proper conception of healthcare.

Being light

Being light means pointing to a better way and demonstrating a better way. In our context I think it means:

- Sharing with others and demonstrating by our actions our conviction that dignity is God-given and not conditional on our physical or cognitive ability or need for care.
- Taking opportunities to better prepare people to
 - accept their mortality
 - cope with the losses that often accompany serious illness and old age
 - make decisions about whether to accept or forgo certain types of treatment at critical times in their lives
 - be gracious receivers of care if or when their turn comes
 - prepare their loved ones for their departure and absence
 - face their own death or the death of loved ones with the assurance that Jesus has triumphed over death and has a place in his house for those who trust in him.

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