

Lord, let your servant depart in peace, but do not cast me away!

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I am a pastor and general practitioner. Ancient words of wisdom from two people inform my response to the now legal practice of voluntary assisted dying (VAD). Both words of wisdom value and promote relationships, while VAD breaks relationships.

The first piece of sage advice is from Hippocrates, the gentile Greek physician of the classical period (460 BC–370 BC). His eponymous oath instructs all physicians to promise that:

‘I will use treatment to help the sick according to my ability and judgement, but never with a view to injury or wrongdoing. Neither will I administer a poison to anyone when asked to do so, nor will I suggest such a course.’

With about sixty-seven other freshly trained doctors I made this promise at the end of my undergraduate medical training.¹ It was part of what was called a ‘Declaration of Professional Dedication’, a modified form of the Hippocratic oath.² I took it as an oath. Thankfully it omitted Hippocrates’ original opening words, ‘I swear by Apollo the physician, and Asclepius, and Hygieia, and Panacea, and by all the gods and goddesses as my witness.’ For the sake of future surgeons it also omitted Hippocrates’ original prohibition against cutting the patient open when he said, ‘I will not use the knife, even upon those suffering from stones’ (i.e. bladder stones!). He did not oppose surgery in principle, but referred this practice ‘to those who are trained in this craft’.³

Hippocrates prohibition from 2,500 years ago suggests that assisting someone to die was considered acceptable, at least by some. Our so-called progressive society thinks it’s doing something innovative through VAD. But it’s not. It’s as old as Adam’s and Eve’s departure from the Garden of Eden, as another wise teacher says, ‘there is nothing new under the sun’ (Ecclesiastes 1:9). Even the pagan Hippocrates knew his duty was to care for his patients and not kill them. God’s command, ‘You shall not murder’ is applicable to all people, Greek, Hebrew, Australian and New Zealander alike (Exodus 20:13; Romans 1:18–32).

Hippocrates’ oath is a professional commitment. It binds doctors to each other, to their patients, to their teachers and students, to society, and to their God or gods. It’s

1 At the Qualifying Ceremony 1 December 1995 in Lecture Theatre 3, Flinders University Medical School, South Australia.

2 Contrary to popular opinion the Hippocratic Oath, its variations and other oaths, are not universally made by medical graduates, including in Australia.

3 Cf. Hippocrates of Cos (1923), ‘The Oath’, in Hippocrates, *Ancient Medicine. Airs, Waters, Places. Epidemics 1 and 3. The Oath. Precepts. Nutriment*, transl. W. H. S. Jones, Loeb Classical Library 147 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1923): 298–299.

a commitment to care for the sick including the dying and to not kill them. The oath is dripping with relationship. It not only prohibits me and my colleagues from prescribing a lethal substance,⁴ but also from suggesting it as an option. Its flip side requires doctors to encourage their patient not to take their own life.

VAD laws in Queensland make it an offence to ‘dishonestly or by coercion, induce another person to make, or revoke, a request to voluntary assisted dying. Maximum penalty-7 years imprisonment.’⁵ How will such dishonesty and coercion be defined and by who? What if a court considers the pastor’s proclamation of the resurrection of the dead a dishonest means of dissuading a person from taking their own life? Will an aged care chaplain’s encouragement for their resident to keep their eyes fixed on God’s suffering servant Jesus Christ when facing sickness or death be considered coercion?

Thankfully some jurisdictions make it an offence for a doctor to suggest VAD to a patient who has not asked for it. Others permit this as long as the doctor also informs the patient of palliative care options available to them. But what if such palliative care options are not available? VAD reveals the great confusion our world is in. It’s always a good idea to read proposed legislation of what on the surface sounds like a reasonable idea. The devil is always in the detail. On the one hand we do our best to prevent self-harm and suicide during an epidemic of mental ill health. On the other we criminalise encouraging people to live with hope, even in suffering. VAD is a symptom of the breakdown of our society’s relationship with its most vulnerable people.

Truer wisdom was spoken circa 4–6 BC, by a Jewish man, Simeon of Jerusalem. In the Jerusalem Temple, after seeing the infant Jesus, he held the Christ in his arms (Luke 2:22–28). With Mary and Joseph looking on in amazement Simeon said:

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace,
according to your word.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all people,
a light to reveal you to the nations,
and the glory of your people Israel.

*(Song of Simeon)*⁶

We sing these words with Simeon after we have done something more profound. We sing Simeon’s Song (Luke 2:29–32) after eating and drinking Christ’s living body and blood for the forgiveness of sins, giving us peace with God, life and hope in this dying world.⁷ Simeon’s words drip with relationship and lifegiving hope. The meal that unites the

4 The term used in many pieces of legislation describing the medication given to end the patient’s life.

5 Queensland Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2021 – Section 141 (1), <https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/pdf/asmade/act-2021-017>.

6 Lutheran Church of Australia, *Lutheran Hymnal with Supplement* (Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 1995), 20.

7 Simeon’s Song is also suggested to be sung or said at the end of the funeral service in the LCA’s *Church*

Christian with their Lord, also unites the Christian with all of God's people around the world and of all time, in heaven and on earth.

Simeon had waited patiently to see God's promised Christ. God's promise now fulfilled, he was ready to die, 'to depart (*ἀπολύω*) in peace'. He asks God to 'dismiss', 'release', 'let go of' him. We can thank God for the gift of palliative care that provides care, not death, to the dying. Palliative care is God's means of letting the dying depart in peace. In fact, good palliative care not only improves quality of life but can also extend the life of the dying. This is because relieving distressing symptoms such as pain, breathlessness and nausea can save much needed strength and energy.

Simeon did not say, 'Lord, throw (*ἀπορρίπτω*) me out'. VAD throws a person out of this life. Some VAD laws deceptively refute this. The Queensland⁸ and West Australian⁹ VAD laws specifically prohibit the doctor from stating the true cause of a patient's death, the administration of a lethal substance. Instead, they mandate the doctor state the cause of death as 'the disease, illness or medical condition' for which the patient requested VAD. This is quite strange and reveals an inherent unease and shame about VAD. If a person receiving palliative care for a terminal disease died in a car accident, their terminal disease would not be written down as the cause of death on their death certificate.

Simeon knew his bible, remembering what the psalmist prays in Psalm 71:

Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
forsake me not when my strength is spent. (Ps 71:9, ESVUK)

Simeon recognises he does not belong to himself. He's the Lord's servant (*δοῦλος*). His life is not his own. The Lord gave Simeon life, the Lord is the only one to take it. So, he seeks permission from His Lord to die, in His good timing. Simeon does not take his own life. Simeon's life and words are a great comfort for Christians. But it's offensive to modern ears prizing the notion of personal autonomy. Yet the truth is that there is no such thing as absolute autonomy. We are connected, we live in relationship with each other, and relationships are life giving. Even modern western society recognises autonomy must have limits. We experienced this most recently in the Covid-19 pandemic when many personal freedoms were limited for the common good. To take your own life to relieve your own suffering is an act of despair for the person themselves and for society. It breaks your relationship with God and other people, especially when you expect someone else to help you end your life.

If we let someone take their own life, we also break our relationship with them. Judas' example, though understandable given the gravity of his sin, is not one for Jesus' other disciples to follow (Matthew 27:3–10). Of course, a Christian may freely lay down their own life for the sake of another's life. God may even call each one of us to do this. But God

Rites (Openbook Publishers, 1994).

8 Queensland Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2021 – Section 81 (3) (a) & (b), https://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/view/pdf/asmade/act-2021-017_

9 West Australia Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2019 – Section 82 (6), https://www.legislation.wa.gov.au/legislation/statutes.nsf/law_a147242.html.

gives and takes away life (Job 1:21). We are not our own, we have been bought at a price, Christ's precious life blood (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

Some might argue, 'Could not God use VAD as a means of releasing His servants who are suffering pain and distress?' A fair question, on the face of it. After all God gives police the authority to kill to protect the lives of others and themselves. We have armed forces authorised by God to protect our nation from violent attack from other nations. Christians can faithfully serve in the armed services, yes even kill the enemy with a good conscience, because they are acting under the governing authorities put in place by God for the welfare of the nation (Romans 13:1–7). Could VAD be another one of God's instruments authorising society to bring about the death of the sick? No. God's Word is clear, 'You shall not murder'. Luther's *Small Catechism* teaches us:

We are to fear and love God so that we do not hurt our neighbour in any way, but help him in all his physical needs.¹⁰

Whose life is being protected by intentionally ending the life of someone when they ought to be cared for? Perhaps the life being 'saved' is the one unwilling to walk with someone who is dying or in distress. Or it's the life of someone who despairs at the prospect of suffering and death and is unwilling to be helped by someone else, by asserting their personal autonomy. The finality of death in this world, our sinful human tendency for abuse, and human error, however well intentioned, prevents society from permitting the intentional ending of a patient's life. This is especially so given the rich resources available to us through palliative care.¹¹

I have been a medical practitioner for twenty-seven years and a pastor for thirteen years. Hippocrates' oath has been modified over the ages. Like the grass and flowers of the field it has withered over the past three decades in Australia and New Zealand. But the word of our merciful God stands forever (Isaiah 40:8). With the Holy Spirit's strength may I and all of Christ's brothers and sisters obey God rather than people for the common good and God's glory (Acts 5:29).

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10 Martin Luther, *The Small Catechism* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, 1960).

11 The Australian and New Zealand Society of Palliative Medicine (ANZSPM) was formed in 1993. The Australasian Chapter of Palliative Medicine was established by the Royal Australian College of Physicians in the late 1990s. Palliative Care medicine was recognised by the Commonwealth government as a specialty in 2005.