

SENIORS HAVE THEIR SAY ON VOLUNTARY ASSISTED DYING

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More than 3,500 older Australians have answered a National Seniors Australia survey of their views on voluntary assisted dying (VAD).

Of those who responded, 86% either supported or strongly supported the option of voluntary assisted dying for those with a terminal illness.

When asked about voluntary assisted dying when illness was not terminal, 67% either supported or strongly supported the option. There were three times as many people undecided on this question compared to the terminal illness one.

Over 650 respondents wrote comments about VAD, revealing diverse reasons behind their views.

National Seniors Australia's CEO Professor John McCallum said, for example, the report title "The Quality of Death?" is a verbatim comment from one person who wrote 'the quality of death should be given the same attention as the quality of birth'.

Professor McCallum said many of the comments were powerful and went beyond just the legislation. "We received more comments than other studies had, from respondents who supported VAD provisions because of people taking their own lives in distress and causing family grief."

Over one hundred respondents shared stories from their personal or professional lives about witnessing people suffering and dying, attributing their views on VAD to those experiences.

Other survey respondents raised the concern that older people may feel coerced into a VAD decision by family members, care organisations or societal ageism. Such views were not only expressed by VAD opponents or the undecided but from respondents who were pro-VAD.

"Our members asked us to do this survey and with our increasing ability to keep people alive at all ages this issue has to be discussed and addressed in the community," said Professor McCallum.

"Better information on this and a balanced community conversation on VAD is needed. We could also learn from the Canadians who put a 5-year review on their legislation to assess its value in practice and further reforms."

Finally, Professor McCallum emphasised: "To progress this emerging issue we must respect people's views on both sides of this debate which we know are aligned with some deeply held values."

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