

NT Voluntary Euthanasia Society Inc

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Patron: Mr Marshall Perron

Member of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies

Newsletter No 4 - November 1996

Dear Members,

**12 DECEMBER DEADLINE FOR YOUR SUBMISSIONS
TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE.
PLEASE - DON'T ALLOW OUR VE LAW TO BE OVERTURNED!**

We know how much you all want to see the Northern Territory law allowing voluntary euthanasia remain in place.

Most of you will also know that our VE law is currently threatened by attempts overturn it through the Euthanasia Laws Bill (the Andrews Bill) currently being debated in the federal House of Representatives.

If the Andrews bill is passed in the House of Representatives, it will go to the Senate and only if it is also passed in the Senate will the NT Rights of the Terminally Ill Act be overturned.

The Senate have now agreed that the Legal and Constitutional Committee inquire into and report on the provisions of the Euthanasia Laws Bill 1996 and in particular:

- the desirability of the enactment of the provisions;
- the constitutional implication for the Territories of the enactment of the provisions;
- the impact of the enactment of the provisions on the Northern Territory criminal code; and
- the impact on, and attitudes of, the Aboriginal community.

Anyone can make a submission to the committee. It can be in any form from a brief letter to a substantial document, and can address some or all of the issues.

It is extremely important that the Senate Committee receive a large number of letters from supporters of the NT Rights of the Terminally Ill - in particular from supporters within the Northern Territory. So to all of you who have been following the news and wondering what you can do to help - now is your chance!

Write your letters and get them off to the Committee before 12 December. By the time you receive this there will not be much time, so please grab your pen and paper and do it right now. The address for submissions is

The Secretary,
Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Thank you for your help.

Lynda Cracknell, President, NTVES

THIS QUARTER'S KEY EVENTS

The Annual General Meeting
The death of Bob Dent
World Federation of Right to Die Societies
Federal Parliament challenge
High Court Challenge.

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The AGM was held on 21 September at the Mirambeena Resort. Marshall Perron addressed the meeting, and at the conclusion of the meeting, Marshall Perron and Philip Nitschke presented a cheque for \$1000 to Mr Hinton Lowe, winner of the Marta Alfonso-Bowes essay/poetry competition.

There have been some changes in the Committee membership for this year, the members now being
Lynda Cracknell - President / Acting Secretary
Andy Chapman - Vice President
Cherry Perron - Treasurer
Stan Phillips
Kay Jensen
Alan Cracknell

The turnout of approximately 15 people was extremely disappointing given we have a total membership of over 100 - as was the difficulty in attracting nominations for the committee.

If any of our new members (or old for that matter!) would like to involve themselves from time to time, a call to Lynda on 8945-4718 would be most welcome.

As a room in the presidents house in Karama has become the de-facto NTVES office, helpers in the near vicinity would be appreciated.

BOB DENT

How can more words be written about the death of Bob Dent - reported throughout the world as the first medically assisted death under the Northern Territory's Rights of the Terminally Ill Act?

Many hundreds of thousands of people throughout the world would have rejoiced with the news that Bob was able to exercise his choice for a humane death at a time of his choosing.

Who could have refused him his right to leave behind his failing body and the pain which he had fought against for so long?

Sadly some *would* have denied him that right. Marshall Perron in his talk to the world federation said this of Bob Dent's right to die. "The hard core Christian minority was outraged. The Vatican described Dent's death as "an absurd act of 'total cruelty'." Cardinal Clancy said it was murder. Northern Territory Bishop Collins said it was immoral."

"No humane compassionate person could condemn Bob Dent or the way he died. If you are one of those who would have denied him a final moment of control and dignity, the chance to cry with his wife - then you have no heart!"

Marshall echoed what must be the thoughts of all members of the NTVES.

On a more personal note, some of us in the NTVES got to know Bob just a little. A member of NTVES since April this year, Bob was keen to help, and wrote some marvellous letters which were published in the NT News.

He also helped us with identifying people to write to when we held a membership drive. Unbeknown to us he must have been in considerable pain and distress even then, but he left us with a memory of an unfailing smile, and a big armful of encouragement.

If there is some part of us which lives on after the death of our bodies, then I would guess that Bob would have met up with Marta, Max and others to form a cheer squad for the ongoing victory of the Right to Die movement.

Rest in peace now friend.

WORLD FEDERATION OF RIGHT TO DIE SOCIETIES - MELBOURNE, OCT 96

Our president was in Melbourne on other business and was able to take leave to attend the international conference of the World Federation of Right to Die Societies. Here is Lynda's report.

“It was one of the most interesting and stimulating conferences I have ever attended. My only regret is that it lasted for only four days and not four weeks.

It was great to finally meet so many of the people throughout Australia and the world who share our aims, and some of the very special people who have been a tower of strength and support and encouragement to us during some of the tough times when it would have been easy to give up.

Among the many ‘phone friends’ I finally met were Fran Clayton from Cairns, Sonia Mullenberg from Brisbane and Ralph White from Perth. And I met again with Robert Cousins - Sydney, Mary Gallnor - Adelaide, Rodney Syme - Melbourne, and last but not least the tireless Kay Koetsier who did such a marvellous job as organiser/hostess on behalf of the Victorian VES.

The prominent international delegates and speakers included;

- Dr Michael Irwin, a retired physician who was medical director at the United Nations and is now chairman of the VE Society in London.
- Professor Dr Meinrad Schar, President of EXIT the Swiss Association for Human Dying and previously a professor of social and preventive medicine at the University of Zurich;
- Dr Faye Girsh, a clinical and forensic psychologist who is Executive Director of the Hemlock Society USA;
- Mr Josephus Jitta, head of the Public Prosecution Office at a district court in the Netherlands and a board member of the Dutch VE Society; and
- Dr Aycke Smook. Dr Smook is a surgeon with a special interest in oncology. He is president of the Dutch society of medical ethics groups within general hospitals and a board member of the Dutch VE Society.

I was awed to be in such distinguished company and able to hear first hand about what is

happening in some of the huge international RTD organisations, many of whom have tens of thousands of members.

It seemed all the more incongruous, as representatives of such a small group, to share with Marshall Perron who was present as a guest speaker, and Dr Philip Nitschke, the applause and accolades which were given by these most important people to the achievements of the Northern Territory.

Because we need to get this newsletter out quickly (due to the call for Senate Committee submissions), I will have to save for later editions some of the details of the progress and achievements in other countries.

Finally though I should add that I attended the conference as a ‘non-member’ delegate, but, after consultation with other committee members, accepted an invitation to apply for the NTVES to become a member organisation of the World Federation.

This was put to a delegates meeting and we were accepted by ‘popular acclamation’ (in Territory speak that’s thundering great applause!).

THE CHALLENGE IN FEDERAL PARLIAMENT

In addition to the letter on the front page about the Senate Committee, here are some extra points of interest.

At the time of writing about 40 MPs have spoken for 10 minutes each on the Andrews’ bill. The debate is going on in a secondary chamber usually reserved for uncontroversial business, but the debate is still being recorded in Hansard if anyone wants to research further.

Of the speakers, 24 are reported as being in favour of Andrews’ bill, and if this trend in speakers is reflected in the final vote in the House of Representatives, the bill would be passed.

The House is due to sit again early in December, so if only about 60 people want to speak as reported, a vote should be possible before Christmas.

If passed in the House of Representatives the bill is referred to the Senate. As the Senate Committee (see 1st page) is due to table its report by 24 February, it will be sometime after then before we have an outcome. That assumes it doesn't get defeated in the House of Representatives which would be a preferred result.

THE HIGH COURT CHALLENGE

As reported in the last newsletter, Dr Wake and Rev Gondarra are attempting to challenge the NT Rights of the Terminally Ill Act in the High Court of Australia.

The High Court was to have heard a request for the Challenge on 15 December, but the Court deferred the hearing until the federal parliamentary processes are completed.

This is quite good news from our point of view as it removes an immediate threat, but it does mean that the our VE law could still be challenged in the High Court next year, even if it withstands the assault being mounted by Kevin Andrews in the Parliament.

Don't forget to go back to page 1 to write your letters to the Senate Committee - Letters from our NTVES members can help

A LETTER FROM M.R.

In Melbourne recently I met an attractive and articulate young lady, Ms Gallagher, who prefers to be known by the initials 'M.R'. A quadriplegic with an incurable illness, M.R uses a voice controlled computer to write and was delighted to help us when I asked her to write a letter for publication in this Newsletter. I hope she contributes more material to our Newsletter in the future. LC.

GOOD LIFE, GOOD DEATH: BUT WHEN

I heard it said recently that, "at the end of a good life should come a good death". My life was good, in fact, very good, until four years ago when the combination of respiratory failure and so-called "naive medical management" ended my good life. However, my good life was not to be followed by a good death. My subsequent, enduring legacy is quadriplegia; severe, chronic pain; chronic fatigue and the plethora of associated medical problems.

Moreover, there is the often unrecognised or, perhaps, unacknowledged psychological suffering, anguish and loss of dignity. Medical science, since the time of Descartes in the 17th century, has arbitrarily separated mind from body and thus we are far more willing to accept the existence of physical than psychological suffering. I have constant body pain but I could not say that my psychological pain was any less significant or soul destroying. Would anyone determine my life as having qualify with my type of illness and when the only place society can find for me is in a nursing home? I think not.

So what is my future? I don't have a terminal illness but an incurable one for which there is no treatment. What I have to look forward to is more of the same, with certain, tedious deterioration, and everyone desperately trying to keep me alive. By the way, I am 30 years old. Though it should not be, my age is an issue and the fact that I have all my so-called mental faculties makes their fight that much more desperate. Do these factors make my suffering any less? And is their fight for them or me?

So what do I want? Obviously I want my good life back, but reality negates this. So I want the choice to die. I could not have been more delighted when the Rights of the Terminally Ill Act was passed in the Northern Territory and I truly hope that it is allowed to achieve what it promises. Furthermore, I hope that the plight of the many others in my situation is considered in future legislation and our choice to access a good death is possible. For now, I will continue my own personal search for a good death. Wish me luck!

M.R. Gallagher