



NT Voluntary Euthanasia Society Inc

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WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

In 1996, the Northern Territory became the first jurisdiction in the world to have voluntary assisted dying (VAD) legislation able to be used. The *Rights of the Terminally Ill Act* was a private member's bill sponsored by then Chief Minister Marshall Perron as a farewell gift to the people of the NT as he retired from politics. Four people had a peaceful death under this compassionate legislation before it was overturned in 1997 by a private member's bill from Kevin Andrews in the Federal Parliament led by John Howard. The NT and the ACT were prohibited from passing VAD legislation. Over the next 26 years many attempts were made to undo this act which made those who live in the territories second class citizens. In the meantime, all of the states except NSW now have operational Voluntary Assisted Dying schemes. Victoria's law has been operating since mid 2019, WA's law since mid 2021, Tasmania since October last year, Queensland since 1 January this year and SA since 31 January this year. NSW is currently in the implementation phase; their law will not take effect until 28 November 2023. Finally, after previous failed attempts by many different politicians, the *Restoring Territory Rights Bill 2022* (proposed by Luke Gosling and Alicia Payne), passed its final hurdle in the Senate on 1 December 2022 which means the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory can once again consider the legalisation of voluntary assisted dying. The ACT is working on it but NT Chief Minister Natasha Fyles says she will not consider it in "this term of government". The next NT election is 24 August 2024! Dr Philip Nitschke, a key player in 1996, happened to be visiting Australia when this announcement was made. He came back to the Territory in an attempt to influence the NT government to consider VAD sooner. A meeting was held in Darwin and signatures collected on an open letter to the government and he has an appointment for a meeting with the Chief Minister to present the letter. Maybe it will be enough to make her consider legislating sooner than a year and a half from now.

The NT News is back supporting the call for the Chief Minister to legislate for voluntary euthanasia or VAD in the NT. They published Liz's Final Wish, first just on line but then in print for the older readers who prefer to turn paper pages. Here is the story written by Annabel Bowles.

"Thank you so much for understanding - you know I can't do this existence anymore," Liz Holmes texted her daughter on a Friday morning in 2017. Later that day, she took her own life. For 24 years the devoted mother-of-three battled terminal breast cancer, two hip replacements and a broken back, leaving her with "nothing to look forward to but pain and indignity".

"We should all be able to choose when we die, so with great courage and no cowardice I go to God. An act of love," a letter left on her dining table read. Sharon Cramp-Oliver knew what her mother was going to do, but was prevented from doing anything about it, much less being there for her final days. At the time, euthanasia was not legal anywhere in Australia. Liz died in her garage with her dog Katie, "her saviour".

"My mum was so unselfish. Her whole life, she did everything for everybody, expecting nothing back," Sharon said, speaking with her partner Spud Thomas from their Territory bush property. "She was so concerned that if we were with her, we would be charged as an accessory to her death. It was so, so difficult because I really wanted to be there, and I couldn't. She wouldn't let me."

But there was one thing Sharon could try to do for her mother. "For about six weeks every afternoon, up until the day she took her life, Spud and I would have a glass of wine with her over the phone and we would just talk about everything," Sharon said. "But she was also telling me something needs to be done about euthanasia, saying 'you need to do something about it'." Liz's last text message said "you of all people can do it".

In the five years since Liz's passing, Sharon has shared her mum's story with the world. It was tabled in the NT parliament two months after her death, as well as in Canberra late last year as Territory Rights passed. Sharon has written to "every single politician you can think of" including the Governor-General and the late Queen, urging decision-makers to act on euthanasia.

In that time she has watched almost all Australian jurisdictions grant people that right. All but her own.

The NT government, despite being the first in the world to legalise assisted dying, has no plans to return that right to Territorians anytime soon. Chief Minister Natasha Fyles has maintained she will not put the issue to parliament before the 2024 election.

"As Northern Territory residents I believe we should have the same rights as everybody else in Australia, and we don't right now," Sharon said. "This is not about politics, this is about people's rights."

Above all, Sharon remembers her mother as resilient, kind and wickedly funny. Liz was a Lifeline counsellor in her hometown Tamworth for 18 years. She was someone who would "look after all the kids in the neighbourhood", a "beautiful soul".

But Sharon will never forget about the difficulties Liz endured and the decision she faced in her final years. In the end, she could not travel to visit her family, drive or barely walk. "My mum kept a diary all her life, I have all her diaries," she said. "A while after she passed, I started reading some of her older diaries and she'd been contemplating taking her own life for a number of years."

"She was in so much pain. It's quite amazing how she documented her pain and everything throughout the diaries," Spud said. "She was incredibly tough, amazingly strong minded." Sharon said the choice to die peacefully and without pain was her mother's legacy. "That's why I'm doing this," she said. "It would have been really nice if we could have all sat down, had dinner and said 'OK Mum, are you all right? Are you ready? Are you sure?'"

"Give her a hug.....everybody could have given her a hug."

On the Opinion OURS & YOURS page, the Editorial is very supportive. Read it here.

THE RIGHT TO DIE

No-one should have to witness a loved one going through a slow and painful death. But unfortunately for families like Sharon Cramp-Oliver's, it's a situation that they had to face when her mother Liz Holmes was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer as well as battling through two hip replacements and a broken back. Instead of being able to do anything about her mother's pain and suffering, Sharon just had to watch

and be there for her mother as she made the impossible decision between continuing her life of agony or taking her own life. In 2017 she chose the latter. Sharon and her family never got to say goodbye to their mother before she died, out of fear they would become an accessory to her death. Since then Sharon has been advocating for the NT to bring back voluntary assisted dying, writing to politicians and the late Queen to see change. "As Northern Territory residents I believe we should have the same rights as everybody else in Australia, and we don't right now," Sharon said. "This is not about politics, this is about people's rights." A poll of more than 500 NT News readers shows a vast majority want to see voluntary euthanasia legalised in the Territory. However Chief Minister Natasha Fyles has stood firm on her government's decision to not push the item in parliament before the 2024 election. This is despite the battle for Territorians to even make these kinds of decision being won and the Restoring Territory Rights Bill passing through federal senate in December. It's a shame it will be such a long time before Territorians are able to choose to die with dignity. Given the NT was on the frontier of introducing legislation for voluntary assisted dying in 1995, it seems wrong that we're now so far on the back foot. As former NT Chief Minister Marshall Perron said: "The hard work has been done. All that is needed now is some action." Some action that will mean families like Liz and Sharon's are able to say goodbye to their loved ones, and choose the path into death that suits them.

COMMENTS ABOUT LIZ'S ONE DYING WISH

I totally fail to understand why the Northern Territory government have not made this a priority especially when all the hard work has already been done!
Annette

Here's an idea Tash, before you go why don't you leave one positive legacy for the NT and legalise euthanasia. It can't be too hard we've had it here once before.
Peter

It's disgraceful that family should be kept apart at a time like that. We need a much more sensible approach to how people reach the end of their lives - their dignity and comfort should be the highest priority.
Marcus