

# At life's end, may all find God's peace

Hospital chaplaincy coordinator Stephen Delbridge reflects on Victoria's voluntary assisted dying legislation.

**W**ITH VICTORIA'S assisted dying legislation enacted in June there has been a change in the wind, and as a society, and as a church, we feel the breeze on our cheek. The first Victorians have taken up the "option" now available and the first Victorians have "effected" their chosen and legally available action.

The legislation is clear about the formal procedure for accessing voluntary assisted dying. Only medical practitioners and specialists who are specifically trained and actively supported may have this conversation. An obvious challenge is the training of sufficient medical practitioners to respond to the conversations that may now be sought by Victorians about voluntary assisted dying. Medical practitioners are not allowed to raise the option of assisted dying with a patient. If a patient does raise the option, the practitioner must be convinced that no coercion was involved.

As coordinator of the Anglican hospital chaplains, I have had conversations both before and since this new legislation was enacted, with our chaplains and with other spiritual care practitioners employed by the hospitals.

Our spiritual care practitioners are ministering in palliative care, cancer services and in any part of the hospital, and questions of faith, of life and death, of identity, meaning and purpose, are our daily work. These conversations come with patients, families and with staff. The spiritual care practitioner is one of those who can sit with the conversation and allow the person to explore their questions.

As a hospital chaplain in a public hospital, I am not on the front line of the conversations about assisted dying, for these conversations must be had with qualified doctors.

When I sat with Denise (not her real name), who had stage 4 cancer, I found that she had already initiated these conversations about assisted dying with her family and with her doctors. She was dying and she knew it. She had asked her nurse to make a referral for her to see the Anglican chaplain. Over the ensuing days and several conversations, she talked about her faith and her plans for her funeral and how she might celebrate her "wonderful life" as she called it. She wondered if her vicar would take her funeral. She talked of the support of her husband and her children. She talked about what was



Assisted dying: seek wise and trusted counsel.

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important to her in her faith and in her life. She spoke of her sense of God's presence, of God's peace, that had emerged so strongly in her over those weeks. We prayed together each time we met. As we

talked, her plans became clearer and she identified ways to invite those close to her, including her vicar, into the important conversations she desired.

By law I am not able to talk about end-of-life plans and I found I had no desire to go there. Rather I am one person in the "team" that surrounds her and I am clear about who I am in this place. She was a person of faith and she had found a way to engage her faith in God with her desire to manage her death. My desire was to support her to have those conversations with God and with her family and those important to her.

Her vicar was able to pray with her and to anoint her, and a few days later she died surrounded by those she loved. The celebration of

her faith in God and her joys and struggles was the completion for her of her life journey.

The issues and feelings surrounding assisted dying are complex and the range of opinions is as diverse as one would expect. I encourage Victorians who need support at this time to seek wise and trusted counsel where your feelings can be explored and your questions are safe.

Only a few Victorians will ultimately take up the option of assisted dying that is offered by the legislation. Many doctors and medical staff, patients and families find the changes offered by the legislation inconsistent or incompatible with their faith in God and their appreciation of good medical practice.

Our prayer is that all will find in their faith in God the peace "that passes understanding" that will "keep their hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God" and will find in that peace the way to die in faith, blessed and surrounded by love, sure in the knowledge of their eternal home.

If you or someone you know is troubled by this story, you can call Lifeline on 131 114 or beyondblue on 1300 224 636, or visit [lifeline.org.au](http://lifeline.org.au) or [beyondblue.com.au](http://beyondblue.com.au).

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