

1 August, 2019

Ms Leslie Guy  
Secretary to the Joint Committee on End of Life Choices  
Parliament of South Australia

Level 13, 257 Collins Street  
Melbourne VIC 3000  
PO Box 38  
Flinders Lane VIC 8009  
T: (03) 8662 3300  
F: (03) 9663 6177  
psychology.org.au

Via email: [jcendoflifechoices@parliament.sa.gov.au](mailto:jcendoflifechoices@parliament.sa.gov.au)

Dear Ms Guy,

**Re: Submission to the South Australian Joint Committee on End of Life Choices**

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to this Inquiry.

Psychologists have important knowledge and skills to contribute towards addressing some of the interpersonal challenges surrounding end-of-life trajectories. This contribution relates not only to the debate about legalising assisted dying, but also includes broader issues relating to palliative and end-of-life care and advance care planning.

**The APS neither endorses nor opposes voluntary assisted dying. This neutral position acknowledges that there are good psychological evidence and arguments both for and against assisted dying.** The APS acknowledges that the laws in relation to voluntary assisted dying are ultimately a matter for society and government. However, **if the South Australian Government chooses to implement voluntary assisted dying, the APS would like to be consulted and provide expert input into the process.**

The APS endorses a best practice approach to end-of-life care, requiring that patients fully understand their alternatives and the main ramifications of their decision to access voluntary assisted dying services should they become legal outside Victoria. Ultimately, the APS emphasises the importance of a process that is characterised by care, compassion and considered decision-making over time. The APS envisages that such a process would include access to the full range of care options, from the highest quality palliative care and the most competent psychological assessment and psychosocial support.

There is a significant discrepancy between people's preferences for end-of-life care and what actually happens. Death and dying has become increasingly medicalised and thus the domain of medical professionals. In the developed world, people are living longer and death, now typically occurring in hospital settings, is becoming less visible and more medicalised. However, in addition to physical health, end-of-life concerns encompass individual and shared community

perceptions of what a life worth living looks like, and how to enable people to create their own possibilities, hope and choices.

**The APS recommends that the South Australian Government considers the limitations of the existing, and very medicalised, service system to manage people's preferences and sense of control as they approach the end of their life.** There is great potential to enhance how people die by improving training to create a more effective health workforce, building better infrastructure, and having more appropriate policies and protocols in place to maximise the real choices (and sense of control) available to the seriously and terminally ill.

One of the greatest concerns about legislative change is the potentially detrimental impact of on the health and wellbeing of people approaching the end of their life, their friends and family, their carers and the broader community, as well as the health professionals involved in implementing the legislative changes. In particular, **the need to support vulnerable people should be at the forefront of any legal decision-making around whether assisted dying should be permitted. The APS recommends that any future legislation include an equity impact assessment** (a decision support tool designed to ensure that a policy, project or scheme does not discriminate against any disadvantaged or vulnerable people).

Many potential risks of voluntary assisted dying have been identified and discussed at length (e.g. Parliament of Victoria, 2016), both nationally and internationally. The main risks and issues from a psychological perspective that have been explored in detail in previous submissions include:

- competence and decision-making capacity and the intersections with mental illness and cognitive impairment;
- coercion and the impact of family and societal attitudes;
- managing the process for conscientious objection;
- the impact on practitioners working with people approaching the end of life;
- increased access to psychological services to assist in capacity assessments, therapeutic interventions and clinical supervision;
- the adequacy and access to health care; and
- the need for more investment in palliative care.

I am happy to be contacted about this submission, and to provide any further information as required.

Yours sincerely



Frances Mirabelli  
Chief Executive Officer

## **About the Australian Psychological Society**

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is the national professional organisation for psychologists with more than 24,000 members across Australia. Psychologists are experts in human behaviour and bring experience in understanding crucial components necessary to support people to optimise their function in the community.

A key goal of the APS is to actively contribute psychological knowledge for the promotion and enhancement of community wellbeing. Psychology in the Public Interest is the section of the APS dedicated to the communication and application of psychological knowledge to enhance community wellbeing and promote equitable and just treatment of all segments of society.

## **Related APS submissions on end of life choices**

The APS has made several relevant submissions to State and Federal Government Inquiries over the last few years:

- [Queensland Inquiry into aged care, end-of-life and palliative care and voluntary assisted dying](#) – April 2019
- [Inquiry into end of life choices in the Australian Capital Territory](#) – March 2018
- [Inquiry into the need for laws in Western Australia to allow citizens to make informed decisions regarding their own end of life choices](#) - October 2017
- [Victorian Government Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill Discussion Paper](#) – April 2017
- [Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into End of Life Choices](#) – July 2015
- [Senate Inquiry into the exposure draft of the Medical Services \(Dying with Dignity\) Bill](#) – August 2014