



College of Nurses Aotearoa (NZ) Inc

P O Box 1258
Palmerston North 4440

Phone: (06) 358 6000

Email: admin@nurse.org.nz

Website: www.nurse.org.nz

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Submission on: End of Life Choice Bill

Submission To: Justice Committee
Parliament Buildings
Wellington

The College of Nurses is a professional body of New Zealand registered nurses and Nurse Practitioners from all regions within New Zealand and specialties both within and outside of the District Health Board ('DHB') setting. It provides a voice for the nursing profession and professional commentary on issues that affect nurses, and also the health of the whole community, aiming for excellence in nursing practice and health care delivery which addresses disparities in health.

The topic of assisted dying or end of life choice provides significant challenges for nursing. There are 55,000 nurses in New Zealand and the profession encompasses vast religious, cultural, professional practice and personal diversity. There are many nurses who completely support assisted dying with the appropriate safeguards in place and there are also many nurses who are strongly opposed. Overarching this division is however a strong commitment to recognizing that people and patients should be able to make and be supported in their own decisions.

Accordingly the College of Nurses cannot take a firm position either for or against the End of Life Choice Bill. We do however offer important comment on the way forward.

Our comments are important because it is nurses who are most closely witness to, and present with people in their times of greatest need and greatest suffering. Nurses have deep compassion in the face of human suffering and accept that they have a key role in preserving dignity and relieving pain and suffering especially at the end of life. Nurses must also practice according to the Nursing Council Competencies and Code of Conduct. The goal of nursing is to deliver the quality and level of care required to support a dying patient or a patient experiencing pain and other distressing symptoms to a level whereby their distress is relieved. Adequate time and resourcing is an important component of making this possible and should receive significant consideration. Proper investment in and extension of hospice services is a critical component of ensuring nurses are able to meet the needs of such patients.

To the greatest possible extent, it is important to respect people's cultural perspective within a New Zealand context and their right to make their own decisions and choices, even when we might personally consider them unwise or even morally wrong in some instances. For nursing then, person centeredness provides an important basis for arriving at decisions about what we support or don't support.

We would therefore

- 1) Submit that the issue be examined in the spirit of patient centered care, alongside the need to respect that as nursing professionals, our personal views should not obstruct the needs and rights of patients and clients to self-determine their own journey through a terminal illness or life limiting event.
- 2) Submit that it be recognized that a nurse may have beliefs and values that differ from those of persons in their care. If nurses can anticipate a conscientious objection to actively ending a person's life, they have a right not to be involved in this process irrespective of the wishes of the person concerned or their representatives. Should end of life choice become legal, nurses not wishing to be involved in the provision of services hastening death should have those wishes respected. Nurses in this position should make their objections known appropriately so that alternative arrangements

can be made, including a safe, continuous and respectful transfer of care to an alternate provider that addresses the unique needs of a client.

- 3) Submit that any move to amend legislation to support end of life choice should not be consequent to a lack of palliative care / hospice services that may well be able to ensure a person is able to die naturally in a relatively pain or distress free state. Access to such services is inequitable in New Zealand and the College would ask that legislation should not be amended until an individual can be guaranteed access to appropriate palliative care no matter where in the country they live thus ensuring that they have genuine choice of an alternate end of life scenario other than an actively induced death.
- 4) Submit that the function and role of an enduring power of attorney in the context of the Bill be clarified.
- 5) Submit that any End of Life Choice legislation include specific, objective and widely used measures of cognitive function in determining a person's ability to understand or make decisions.
- 6) Submit that any End of Life legislation be careful to avoid non-specific terminology such as grievous or irremediable.
- 7) Submit that should the Bill become law it is essential that nurses be significantly involved in the process of determining responsibilities and regulations.



Professor Jenny Carryer RN PhD FCNA(NZ) MNZM
Executive Director
College of Nurses Aotearoa (NZ) Inc