

Pat Dodson's warning on legalised euthanasia



Voluntary assisted dying laws could worsen health crisis ... Labor senator Pat Dodson in Broome on Friday.

Picture: Ben Houston

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THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN -ASSOCIATE EDITOR 12:00AM OCTOBER 5, 2019

The father of Aboriginal reconciliation, Pat Dodson, fears that legalised euthanasia will create a barrier to indigenous people - getting medical care, deepening the health crisis in remote - communities. The widely respected Labor senator is the first major figure on his side of politics to speak out against voluntary assisted dying, as the ALP-governed states continue to champion the law change. Writing in *The Weekend Australian*, Senator Dodson says legislation passed in the lower house of the West Australian parliament lacks indigenous input and could backfire if enacted.

“Fears and suspicions of ‘whitefella’ medicine will only increase, and the capacity to ascertain informed consent will be difficult,” Senator Dodson writes. The state is the second after Victoria to bring forward a government-backed bill for voluntary assisted dying (VAD), while a parliamentary committee in Queensland is well-advanced on assessing the case for legislation there. Liberal-governed South Australia is also eyeing reform, two decades after VAD became law in the Northern Territory but was voided by John Howard’s federal government.

“The Northern Territory experience in the 1990s suggests that the mere presence of this legislation may be a barrier to First Nations peoples receiving healthcare,” Senator Dodson writes.

He says supporters of the bill — “most with good intentions and compassion for loved ones” — are building their case on an individualist rights agenda.

“Such a perspective emphasises the rights of an individual and ignores the wider influence of such decisions on those around them — families, friends and communities,” he writes.

“Individual choice is an important component of this but it should not be the only significant factor because other humans are going to be required to live with the consequences of their part in ending the life of another. “In an increasingly atomised world, we are finding it harder than ever to understand the interconnectedness of our social structures and the political choices that hold them together.”

Asked how a VAD law in his home state of Western Australia would compromise indigenous medical services, Senator Dodson said: “People are very suspicious of the whole (health) system generally. If they find it is associated with potentially the capacity to end your life, as much as to save it, I am fearful people will then, despite their need, start to move away.” Senator Dodson said his thinking on euthanasia bridged his life experience as a one-time Catholic priest, his spirituality as a Yawuru man and the founding role he played in the reconciliation movement. He agreed it was at odds with progressive sentiment in the ALP.

“I think there are things about my way of thinking that may not necessarily sit squarely with all of my comrades,” the 71-year-old said. “Then again, we live in democracy, so it’s up for debate.”

Putting forward “another avenue to death” was confronting for First Nations peoples when they lived shorter lives than other Australians, had babies that were more likely to die of preventable diseases and lost too many friends, cousins and siblings to suicide. “As representatives and legislators, surely we must be focusing our attention to enacting laws that help prolong life and restore the right to enjoy a healthy life,” he said.

Senator Dodson said the WA legislation contained “significant deficiencies” in terms of content and process. A key provision in the benchmark Victorian law that came into effect in June, banning doctors from raising VAD, had been reversed in an error by Perth’s lawmakers, he insisted. Asked what was wrong with a doctor broaching assisted dying with a terminally ill patient, he said: “This is a fine line where the reservoir of knowledge is deemed to be in the professional, when in fact this is about someone else’s life. This is about an individual having to weigh up and consider whether this is an option they really want to take.

“Now, to instigate that discussion ... requires a broader context for First Nations people. They are not just nuclear families ... most of us have extended families and not everyone in those relationships see eye to eye. It’s about reaching consensus on the way forward that enables communities to stay together, rather than ones that simply decide they are going to allow individuals to make decisions for everyone else.

“If it’s then removed off to a doctor without any reference to the community about him initiating discussions with the loved one, then I think that also starts to undermine ... the trust you place in a medical system to look after your health rather than find ways to end your life.”

The consultation with indigenous communities was not only inadequate but rushed, Senator Dodson said. “This is a matter that should be done over a period of time ... one meeting, setting up a forum in one community ... that’s not a way to really consult with First Nations people on a complicated issue like this, that is about the sanctity of life itself, not just about an individual’s life,” he said.

His intervention came after recent polling in Western Australia showed that nearly three-quarters of those living in regional and remote areas of the state supported improved access to palliative care over voluntary euthanasia. The research, for the End of Life Choices Working Group backed by palliative care specialists, found that 56 per cent of the 1900 respondents didn’t believe patients should be helped to die without their loved ones being informed — another point of contention in the WA legislation. The Anglican bishop of North Queensland, Keith Joseph, told a committee of state MPs in August that remote indigenous communities were strongly opposed to VAD, echoing Senator Dodson on its potential to erode trust in the public health system. The WA bill cleared the Legislative Assembly last month by 44 votes to 12, but the numbers will tighten in the upper house. Proponents remain confident the legislation will pass, albeit narrowly.

Senator Dodson agreed the debate was being conducted piecemeal, siloed in state legislatures, with no regard to how the emerging state regimes would interact.

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