

The Australian Bishops reject Victorian euthanasia laws

12:00AM JUNE 19, 201

TESSA AKERMAN

Four of Victoria's Catholic bishops have signed a letter reaffirming their opposition to the introduction today of the state's euthanasia laws, calling it a "deeply troubling chapter" of healthcare in the state.

Melbourne Archbishop Peter Comensoli and Bishops Paul Bird, Patrick O'Regan and Leslie Tomlinson all signed the pastoral letter stating they could not co-operate with the facilitation of suicide "even when it seems motivated by empathy or kindness".

"These words will sound hard to hear, but as pastors of the Catholic dioceses of Melbourne, Ballarat, Sale and Sandhurst, we feel a responsibility not just to say 'no' to VAD (Voluntary Assisted Dying), but to give every encouragement to model a way of life that renders VAD unnecessary," they said.

Patients in Catholic hospitals would not be able to access the life-ending scheme made legal today and would need to seek the service elsewhere.

People would be able to voluntarily end their lives within about three weeks if they were to apply today and met the strict requirements of the program.

Under the scheme, terminally ill Victorian adults who meet 68 criteria will be able to ask their doctor for a lethal combination of medication. As part of the criteria patients must be of sound mind and have less than a year to live — under six months for those with neurodegenerative conditions.

Their suffering must also be deemed "intolerable" and they must make three, clear separate requests to die and be assessed by two experienced doctors.

Medical professionals are able to conscientiously object.

The bishops published a list of their objections, including the lack of funding for "excellent" palliative care.

"We object to the diminishment of the love that can be given and received in the last days of our loved ones. Most of all we object to the lazy idea that the best response our community can offer a person in acute suffering is to end their life," they said.

Premier Daniel Andrews said the bishops' position was well known and he respected their different view: "But the law is the law, we had a debate, we passed those laws. Victoria is leading the way and we're giving compassionate, dignified choices and options to people in terrible pain who have been denied those compassionate choices and options for far too long."

A vigil was held outside Parliament House last night by pro-life supporters. Pro-life Victoria president Denise Cameron said the legislation had come into effect despite wide opposition within the medical community.

"The Andrews government has set in motion a regime which will legitimise suicide for our most vulnerable community members, devalue palliative care and pressure doctors into abandoning their medical ethic of first do no harm," she said.

VAD Implementation Taskforce chairman Julian Gardner said the preparations for the scheme had been thorough, with medication protocols based on the world's best evidence.

"The advice is this medication is more than adequate for the needs," he said.

He said for many terminally ill people, just that there was the option of assisted dying would offer a comfort.

Mr Gardner said he expected the initial takeup to be small but maybe in three years time 150 may make use of the laws.

"Not everybody who's within six months of death has got any interest in this or is suffering in a way that's intolerable," he said.

He said the number of people who accessed the scheme was no indication of how many would actually take the medication.

"I know people who say 'I was just comforted by knowing it's an option, I probably will never use it'. Maybe 30 per cent of people who get the medication won't take it," he said.

Mr Gardner said the scheme would also spark more conversations with doctors about palliative care: "A lot of people think palliative care is where you go to die. In fact it can extend your life and give a better quality of life."

Go Gentle's chief executive Kiki Paul said Victoria's enactment of the Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation was one of the most debated and most prepared for reforms Australia had seen.

“We are confident the law will be rolled out in a safe and consistent way that will give terminally ill Victorians an option not to suffer unnecessarily,” she said.