



anf position
statement

australian nursing federation

voluntary euthanasia / assisted suicide

Voluntary euthanasia is a complex social issue which is currently being debated by the community. Those contributing to the debate include: providers of medical and nursing care; those seeking to end their lives due to pain and illness; advocates for voluntary euthanasia; ethicists; religious organisations; and the broader community.

It has become an issue for a range of reasons including: the advent of modern medical technology which makes it possible to artificially prolong life; cases which have arisen where existing laws have been challenged, such as the Northern Territory 'Rights of the Terminally Ill Act of 1996', which was overturned by the Australian Government; and the growing population of older people and those with terminal illnesses.

For the purposes of this position statement voluntary euthanasia is defined as intervention by one person to end the life of another person with that person's informed consent and with the primary intent of relieving pain and suffering and causing death.

It is the position of the Australian Nursing Federation that:

1. As euthanasia is not legal in Australia, nurses and midwives are obliged by both the law and their professional codes of practice and ethics, to practice within the law.
2. The ANF recognises that its membership comes from diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic backgrounds, and that members hold a range of ethical views on the subject of voluntary euthanasia.
3. Nurses and midwives have the right to hold their own opinion and for their opinion to be respected.
4. Adult patients with decision-making capacity have a common law right to consent to or refuse medical treatment which is offered to them.
5. Nurses and midwives have a professional responsibility to stay reliably informed about the ethical, legal, cultural and clinical implications of voluntary euthanasia.
6. The Australian Nursing Federation has a role in providing nurses and midwives with information about issues related to voluntary euthanasia and providing a forum for nurses and midwives to debate those issues. Its role is also to participate in the broader public debate as an appropriate organisation to ensure that the nursing and midwifery voice is heard.

7. In the event that voluntary euthanasia becomes legalised, nurses and midwives have the right to conscientiously object to participating in the carrying out of voluntary euthanasia.
8. The ANF supports advance care planning where individuals consider end-of-life decisions while they have the capacity to do so, and to provide instructions about their wishes for future treatment for their family and the health professionals treating them to follow.
9. Irrespective of whether euthanasia is legalised ANF will continue to lobby for adequate resources (suitably qualified and adequate numbers of nurses) to provide palliative care for those who need it.
10. The ANF will continue to participate in the debate and will ensure a critical nursing voice is represented in the public and political domains.

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