



Dramatic drop in support for euthanasia law hailed by lawyers' group

Auckland – 16 October 2020. A dramatic drop in support for the End of Life Choice Act shows that New Zealanders are beginning to understand what's at stake in the referendum.

That's the view of Lawyers for Vulnerable New Zealanders, a group of more than 200 Queens Counsel, senior lawyers and legal academics opposing the Act, and who have welcomed the dramatic public shift in support for the Act as shown in the latest Newshub-Reid Research poll released overnight. The poll's latest results show a continuing drop in support for the law, with 56.1 per cent of respondents now saying they are voting "yes" and 33.4 per cent saying "no". Nearly 10 per cent of New Zealanders are still undecided.

"What we're seeing is that support for this dangerous, poorly drafted and shoddy piece of legislation is dropping sharply and is now at a record low", says human rights lawyer Richard McLeod, a spokesperson for the group. "That doesn't surprise us. More and more New Zealanders are starting to wake up and realise just how much of a danger this law presents to our elderly, neglected, poor and lonely. The 'my life, my choice' mantra of its supporters rings hollow for so many tens of thousands of Kiwis for whom this law will actually mean 'my life, no other choice'. As lawyers we're standing up as a voice for those people, to ask New Zealanders to see the risks and vote NO."

The lawyers have found at least 35 holes in the legislation and say its safeguards are inadequate. Grant Illingworth QC, a leading New Zealand barrister and signatory for the lawyers' group, says: "We've all heard of fake news, what about fake safeguards? The only claimed safeguard in this law for detecting whether someone's being pressured into the euthanasia process is that one doctor - who may not even know the patient or have met them before - must just 'do their best' in trying to find pressure".

"In doing that the doctor can only talk with the patient's family members if the patient allows them to, and can only talk to other doctors involved in their care if those doctors exist - which in many situations won't be the case. That's just hopeless - it's shoddy drafting and it's a recipe for abuse."

Prominent lawyer Deborah Manning also opposes the law.

"Our Disability Rights Commissioner and our own doctors - including the Royal NZ College of General Practitioners, Hospice New Zealand and the NZ Medical Association - have highlighted the huge risks in this law including its claimed safeguard against pressure. The College of GPs have said they won't be able to detect pressure in all cases and that there will be wrongful deaths with that check", she says.

“Even courts say that a court process can’t detect pressure in all euthanasia cases”, says McLeod. “So our doctors say they can’t do it, our courts say they can’t do it, and we say doctors can’t do it. Who’s going to do it?”

Those seeking assistance to end their lives are often underprivileged, lonely, or are made to feel they are a burden on others. The Oregon Public Health Division's 2019 Report noted that of those who accessed assisted suicide in Oregon the previous year, 69% were people on low incomes and reliant on state health care insurance, while 59% cited being a “burden on family, friends or caregivers” as one of the main reasons for ending their lives. Canada’s first annual report on its euthanasia law, released just months ago, reported that 34% of those Canadians who were euthanised the previous year cited “perceived burden on family, friends or caregivers” as one of their main reasons for requesting it, while 13.7% of them reported “isolation or loneliness” as one of their main reasons.

Lawyer and disability rights advocate Dr Huhana Hickey says, “Caring societies don’t support legislation that will help poor or neglected people to end their lives because they’re lonely or don’t want to be a bother on the rest of us”.

“We acknowledge this law was drafted with good intentions, but that doesn’t excuse its numerous deficiencies, says McLeod. The End of Life Choice Act, which is literally a matter of life and death for the at-risk members of our society, has been badly cobbled together and is fatally flawed. We call on New Zealanders to vote it out of its misery.”

ENDS

Visit the LVNZ website at www.lvnz.org

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