



Voluntary Euthanasia Society NZ Inc

INTERIM CHAIRMAN'S REPORT 2013-2014

As Interim Chairman of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society (End-of-Life Choice), I am pleased to present this report to you on the activities in 2013-2014.

This year had a very difficult start. At one time the Society was put at major risk of having to cease altogether. However, the situation has now resolved and with some careful management we will be able to present a solid foundation for the eventual passing of legislation. Members have been aware of conflict and problems and we apologise to them, and trust that the National Committee will regain their confidence.

One of the major things which happened was the withdrawal of the EOLC Bill from the ballot box late in 2013. This was done to prevent it becoming a political football during the electioneering in 2014. However the withdrawal of the Bill was very discouraging and caused a loss of momentum for the EOLC movement.

From the 2013 AGM in early June, as during the preceding elections, there were major factions in the National Committee (NC), so much so, that both the elected President and Secretary resigned in frustration at the end of July. A member of the National Committee stepped in as Interim Secretary but resigned in October over differences of opinion. Don Grant was appointed President in August and tried very hard to work with the factions and the Executive Officer, but then resigned in December. The disagreements occurred mainly around personalities and also the role of Yvonne Shaw as Executive Officer, plus the emerging major financial difficulties.

In early January the Treasurer resigned along with several others. At this point chaos reigned with no Officers and the Society was in great danger.

Restructuring had to take place immediately in December/January and included: Kieron Howarth from the Auckland Branch who was co-opted as Treasurer. Jack Havill, the Waikato representative became Interim Chairman (in lieu of President) and Carole Sweney, the Immediate Past-President became Acting Secretary – we saw these as stop gap positions until elections took place before the AGM on 21 June. Peter Cowley, the Wellington representative has looked after the data base and website and helped Eileen Howarth our new office person (see below) get up to speed. Mary Panko, a co-opted member from Auckland, stepped into the National Membership Secretary position. Toni Brown, the Bay of Plenty representative and a lawyer from Tauranga joined the group. Tess Nesdale (Elected Member), Kevin Stone (Elected Member), Sara Heslop (Auckland Rep), Sue Reynolds (Kapiti-

Horowhenua Rep) also continued on the National Committee (NC). This has been a smaller NC of 10 members but has proved very compatible and constructive. I thank them all for their major contribution.

Executive Officer – Yvonne Shaw

EOLC was rapidly running out of money with deficits of \$50-60,000 per year and our funds were severely depleted. Most of the cost incurred was the Executive Officer's salary (\$65,000), so the NC felt that there had to be some restructuring and believed we could not continue to sustain the costs involved in employing a full time EO. A letter went to Yvonne Shaw asking her to consider various options and come back to us with other suggestions, with the intention of having an honest consultation. This letter was sent under the name of Don Grant who was President at the time. To cut a long story short, this turned the matter into a legal tussle. Letters went back and forwards, and after consideration, the NC decided that rather than fight legal battles with large legal costs that they would invite Yvonne to continue to see out her contract until July 14th 2014, and would work constructively with her for the benefit of our organisation. This process, no matter how well intentioned, had an emotional impact on all involved. Following discussions, Yvonne decided to cease her employment early and return to the USA on 7th Feb 2014. Yvonne made some significant contributions while she was with us including speaking in NZ on Oregon law changes, developing the Web site, improving the newsletter and working with the new data base. When she left so suddenly, there was a very awkward transition period without the necessary transfer of knowledge, and this caused a lot of work for the new Office Administrator and some NC members. We were left without a Central Office for a period and a lot of catching up was necessary.

Office Administrator

On the 11 February 2014, the National Committee appointed Eileen Howarth as a part time person (20 hours per week at \$18,000 per year) to run the office, and she works from her home in Auckland. She started on 17 February and worked more than 30hrs a week initially, although the hours needed have now lessened to about 20hrs per week. She has a lot of experience of the type we need and is an excellent person who has run significantly large educational organisations. However, these hours cannot be sustained by her as she has other responsibilities. A second person will almost certainly be needed to help cover all the work especially in entering financial data to help the Treasurer.

Guide to Dying and Emergency Cards

One of the excellent legacies that Don Grant left was the development of the booklet called '**Guide to Dying –Your Way**'. Sales were sluggish in late 2013, so we decided to drop the prices as a 'special offer' and provide the branches with 30 bound copies each (for a start) which they could sell at meetings. The price on line is now \$20 and the bound copy will be

sold for \$25 at Branches. Posted copies go for \$27 to cover the postage. The bound copies look very nice and they are selling extremely well. We reserve the right to put the prices up again if sensible. The Guide now also has an invitation to membership of EOLC and an application form is attached.

A new development has been the **'Emergency Cards'** to be given out free by Branches and a reserve supply is held in the Central Office. These are sent with every Guide and to new members. They are essentially related to the holding of an Advance Directive (AD) and allow the reader to contact someone who holds an AD on behalf of the writer of the AD..

Finance

Members will note that the deficits for the last 2 years have been approximately 46K and 80K respectively (these figures are partly affected by accounting rules which spread the subscriptions of Life Members over 10 year). However it is pleasing to note that we are now recording surpluses each month. The latter has been achieved partly by cutting costs e.g. branch participation in mail outs, low cost printing provided by another organisation, and reducing the AGM cost. However, the main factor is reduction in staff remuneration and travel, and we have to acknowledge the work of Eileen Howarth who has not only worked at low pay, but has worked extra hours pro bono to help the Society. Similarly, Kieron Howarth has gone beyond the call of duty as Treasurer, and we also owe him a debt of gratitude.

The Future

1) Branches and local Focus Groups - we appreciate the enthusiasm of the Branches and consider that the NC role is largely to facilitate what they do. Some focus groups within the Branches also work hard in their particular area. Membership growth will largely come from Branch Activity. My view is that we need to increase the number of formal Branches and it would be to the advantage of the Society if some of the 'focus groups' were to step up from their very active local roles to take part in the formal structure of the organisation. Obviously Dunedin and Canterbury need full Branches, but other centres would also qualify. Tarankai has formed a Sub Branch to Waikato and this is working well. On formation of a full Branch (40 members needed), a representative is elected to the NC and this allows the Branch to have a real say in what is going on. We certainly intend to keep Branches very well informed of NC and each other's activities in the coming year as lack of knowledge at branch level has been a problem in the past.

It has been encouraging to see the Branches start to fundraise locally more.

2) The End-of Life Choice Bill – Maryan Street has promised to return this Bill to the Ballot Box again as soon as possible after the convening of the new parliament, which may not be possible until early 2015. At that time, there must be a real effort at lobbying the new and returned Members of Parliament. There must also be a

fresh consciousness raising for the general public and this is part of the reason for inviting the experienced Dr Rob Jonquiere from the Netherlands in early March 2015. He will have a lot of media exposure. It is pleasing that the media has taken a kindly attitude to Voluntary Euthanasia over recent years.

- 3) **Challenges within the Health Professional Groups** - unfortunately, at the moment, some of the leaders such as in the NZ Medical Association, Hospice movement and Palliative Care professionals, oppose Voluntary Euthanasia. These will be the groups (the experts) who will cause most problems in getting the Bill passed as they will be taken notice of in the Select Committee and by individual parliamentarians. Some religious groups will also be noisy but the evidence from both Australia and Britain suggests that they are representing a minority of their particular groups, and there are a significant majority of religious persons who favour legalisation of the law. If we can get Rob Jonquiere to talk with particularly professional groups that may help a lot because he will make nonsense of some of the concerns held.
- 4) **Resources** – it is important to have a sound financial base to meet our objectives. Advertising and supporting visiting speakers is expensive. Ideally, it is desirable to have a touring visiting expert in Voluntary Euthanasia several times per year to increase media involvement and NZ knowledge. This cannot be done without adequate finance, and the National Committee hopes that as they show evidence of good financial management, that members and others will support our funds in a substantial way. Our membership numbers are just below 1400. We hope also to develop some national fundraising strategies apart from what we have been doing.
- 5) **Other Countries** – other countries are gradually taking up the fight to legalise VE. For instance, if an Australian State or Canadian State succeeds that will add a lot of strength to our cause. The debate in Britain and France is also intensifying.

Finally, I would like to encourage everybody to continue the fight to legalise medically assisted death in the terms of the EOLC Bill. It will happen, but we are still a little uncertain when.

‘You just need to be a flea about injustice. Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation’

Marian Wright Edelman

Jack Havill

Interim Chairman