



VOLUNTARY EUTHANASIA SOCIETY NEW ZEALAND INC

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2015-2016

As the President of the Voluntary Euthanasia Society of New Zealand Inc (End-of-Life Choice), I am pleased to present this report to you on the activities in 2015-2016. Overall this has been a good year from the point of view of the organisation and we have gained financially. Our membership levels are stable at about 1330 with newcomers compensating for those who have died or left. In spite of the disappointment at lack of activity at a politician level, repeated surprisingly positive events have kept the issues around Physician Assisted Dying (PAD) in front of New Zealanders.

1. Office Staff

Eileen Howarth – continued as ‘**Office Administrator**’ but with reduced hours (officially working 8hrs per week). She has worked from her home in Auckland and has been a tower of strength to the organisation, speaking to many members, lending a sympathetic ear, and helping with various difficulties they might be having. She also sends out various email messages to those on line re developments. Her hours usually are more than she is paid for. She has decided that the time has come for her to leave for other pastures and so some rearrangements have been made re the central office. Eileen says she is happy to act as a resource still and will make the transition a good one. Thank you Eileen for your major contribution to our organisation and we wish you well.

Peter Cowley – started as ‘Financial Assistant’ and has worked closely with Eileen. He has been appointed as our new **Office Administrator** starting 30 May 2016. His job is 16 hours per week and our Central Office will now just have the one person, situated in Wellington. The job description encompasses all the previous components of the previous positions of himself and Eileen. This position is separate from his Officer status as Treasurer but obviously overlaps in a very synergistic way. Peter has also been very helpful in reducing costs in various ways including not receiving pay for unworked hours, doing our printing of documents such as the newsletter, labels, and various brochures etc very cheaply, attending to the postage, and sending them by email to those on line.

We should be very grateful to both our office staff as they have been a large component of our stability over the last 12 months. We wish Pete all the best in his new position.

2. National Committee

We have had a very stable National Committee for 12 months and it looks as though this is about to continue over the next year albeit with some changes.

Elected Officers:

President – Jack Havill

I have enjoyed working with the staff and members of the National Committee and Branches who have without fail been positive and helpful. I am resigning the post this year and am pleased to note that Maryan Street will be taking on the role.

National Secretary – Carole Sweney

Carole has brought a lot of experience of the organisation to the role and has been our ‘rock’.

National Treasurer – Peter Cowley

Nobody wants to be Treasurer but Peter took on the role and has done it cheerfully and efficiently. Thank you Peter. A very time-consuming job.

Newsletter Editor - David Barber

David brought his excellent journalistic skills to the Newsletter and has also acted as our Media Advisor and has been invaluable in our contacts with the Press and other media.

National Membership Secretary – John Titchener.

John has brought a long experience in data base management to this role and has ‘cleaned up’ our data base over the year and also checked all new entries to help keep it accurate. He has also taken a role in educating various Secretaries from the Branches in how to use the Wild Apricot data Base. Thank you John. John resigned a few months ago due to ill health and Elizabeth Cronje stepped up into an acting role and will now be taking over the formal role.

Co-opted Member- Maryan Street was coopted as a member because of her various talents, particularly political.

Branch Representatives on the National Committee

Wellington – Suzy Austen initially and presently Julian Parsons

Bay of Plenty – Toni Brown initially and now Sue Reynolds

Auckland – Jim Roskvist

Waikato – Dale Lethbridge

Kapiti/Horowhenua – Olive Mitchell initially and now Jo Milne

All of these people have contributed positively and we feel as though the National Committee connections with the Branches are much better than previously. Of course we have to thank the Chairpersons and Secretaries and other officers of the Branches for their ongoing and splendid contributions at local levels.

2(a) Sub- Branches- we now have 2 sub-branches operating: Taranaki (with Waikato) and now Christchurch (with Wellington) which encompasses the wider Canterbury region and includes the West Coast. Having sub-branches allows local groups to take increasing responsibility under the guidance of their respective parent branches. A big thank you to Lorna Lovegrove who has worked with the Christchurch group to get it established. The Taranaki Chair is Janice Randall. She was co-working with Mary Anderson who unfortunately recently died while enroute to the world conference. Our sympathy goes to the family. In Christchurch, Lindy Harwood has taken the Chair and there is a lot of activity going on.

3. Finance

The financial reports are presented separately. However it is very pleasing to note that we are no longer creating deficits, and gaining significantly on our assets. This has been due to a lot of hard work by various members and is very encouraging. In addition, when called upon to support legal expenses in the Lecretia Seales’ court case, our members responded magnificently and rapidly donated the required money. This means that we are able to have a reasonable reserve fund for future occasions.

We are looking to transfer all Branch and National funds and bank accounts to Kiwi Bank as this is more convenient in doing online payments with our authorised signatories spread across NZ.

Thank you Peter Cowley for your contribution as Treasurer.

4. Significant Events over the year:

a) Petition

Under the leadership of Maryan Street our Society has launched a petition which says: *'We the undersigned, respectfully request that the NZ House of Representatives investigate fully public attitudes towards the introduction of legislation which would permit medically assisted dying in the event of a terminal illness or an irreversible condition which makes life unbearable'*

The petition was presented on Tuesday 23rd June 2015 at 1pm on parliament steps to a representative group of politicians. There were over 9000 signatures. Matt Vickers and his group were also present with the presenters and his support was very helpful.

In short it was agreed that a Select Committee Enquiry would be set up under the auspices of the the Health Select Committee (Chair Simon O'Connor) and they developed quite wide terms of enquiry. There have been over 19,000 submissions which has swamped the process somewhat and progress has appeared slow. A lot of the affidavit submitters to the Lecretia Seales case have also written submissions, some very detailed, including from overseas experts as well including from Rob Jonquiere, Jan Bernheim (Belgium), Udo Schuklenk (Chair of Canadian report on behalf of the Canadian Royal Society into End of Life Decision Making), and Dignitas from Switzerland.

There was some concern over the impartiality of the Chairman of the Select Committee but our views have been expressed directly to him and the Committee.

So we are waiting to see how thorough and capable the Select Committee proves to be. Politicians of all varieties appear to be comfortable to have the enquiry done in this way. Of course it lets them off the political hook somewhat, but optimistically, I think we are in much more progressive space than ever before. The Select Committee will be travelling to various places in NZ, but venues and dates have not been announced as yet.

b) David Seymour End of Life Choice member's Bill in Ballot Box

In October 2015, David Seymour (Act Leader) completed a Member's Bill which he placed in the Ballot Box where it has remained for the moment. While he was developing it, we had some significant input and this resulted in a much improved Bill. We can agree with most of the content except that the option of an End of Life Directive has been excluded, so if a person becomes incompetent during the course of their illness they will be excluded from medical aid in dying e.g. dementia. We could not convince him to add this part as he was convinced that it would cause failure to pass the Bill at the first reading when and if that happens. However, the fact that the Bill is there is good progress and the relationship between that and the Select Committee is yet to be determined by politicians.

Maryan Street's previous End of Life Chice Bill has been modified by a VESNZ committee to a suggested Bill called **End of Life Options Bill**. This has formed part of our VESNZ submission and also Maryan's personal submission, so the content should be known by the Select Committee members, and will form part of our future oral submissions, and of course any submissions to David Seymour's Bill should it emerge for debate.

Overall the VES has taken a supportive attitude to David Seymour's contribution and we do not see him in competition with our aims and objectives – we just want more!

c) Human Rights, Canadian Supreme Court Feb 2015, and subsequent Canadian matters:

This Court brought down a remarkable judgement which is echoing around the world including NZ. It issued the following declaration:

Section 241(b) and S. 14 of the Criminal Code unjustifiably infringes S7 of the Charter and are of no force or effect to the extent that they prohibit PAD for a competent adult person who a) clearly consents to termination of life and b) has a grievous and irremediable medical condition (including an illness, disease, or disability) that causes enduring suffering that is intolerable to the individual in the circumstances of his or her condition.

This fundamentally shifted the whole debate into the human rights area. This Court gave the Canadian State legislatures 1 year to get legislation in place at which time the declaration will stand allowing PAD. They extended this until June 2016. Meantime they have conducted major consultation processes across Canada with some excellent process which can provide great examples for NZ. A Bill now sits before the Canadian Federal Parliament called an 'Act to Change the Criminal Code (Medical Assistance in Dying)'. This allows for assistance for both the terminally ill and those with other grievous suffering.

It should be noted that both the NZ and Australian Human Rights Commissions have this year produced analyses of the issues favourable to 'medical aid in dying'.

e) Public support and overseas progress.

Polls have continued to show that support for legalisation of PAD is in the region of 75-82%. Media articles have been increasingly positive and support from the young is especially impressive. The feeling across NZ is that 'medical aid in dying' has to happen soon.

Increasingly, well known people are coming out in support.

California and Quebec at this point now have legislation in place with the rest of Canada soon to follow.

Unfortunately Britain decided not to pass legislation which leaves many of their clientele travelling to Switzerland for access to assisted dying.

In Australia there has been a lot of activity but no firm success at this time. Andrew Denton, a major media figure in Australia and who will speak at this conference, has made a major resource produced on freely available podcasts, which fundamentally examine the processes in the Netherlands, Belgium, Oregon and other places. He has produced a lot of clear evidence which contradicts the many mischievous and inaccurate claims of opponents to medical aid in dying, in particular contradicting those relating to vulnerable individuals.

f) Opponents

Opponents such as Euthanasia Free NZ, Care Alliance and Right to Life continue to be very active. Most of their statements are misleading and this is being increasingly realised by the public. However the opposition is quite significant as it contains the hierarchy of palliative care, hospice and other medical interests who have taken an opposing stance.

g) The World Federation of Right to Die Societies

We are an active member of this umbrella organisation and Carole Sweney has been the Secretary, and with Dr Rob Jonquière as Communications Manager, we have good contacts across the world and have regular information on advances.

h) Website and social media

In August 2015 we contracted Philip Patston to manage this area for us and he has done a brilliant job, bringing us into the new social media world.

i) Acknowledgements: there are many who could be thanked, but we need to especially acknowledge our Wellington group who regularly do mail post outs. Also I wish to thank them for hosting this conference and thanks to Suzy Austen especially for looking after Andrew Denton in his media and speaking commitments while here in NZ.

j) Andrew Denton: we wish to welcome Andrew Denton to this conference. He has made a remarkable contribution to the knowledge surrounding medical aid in dying by creating a series of excellent podcasts. The content of these were formed as a result of his interviewing many people in the Netherlands, Belgium, Oregon and Australia. In particular he has produced convincing evidence from the major bodies who represent so called vulnerable groups e.g. elderly, and disabled, showing that the evidence is clear that they not at risk of abuse associated with voluntary euthanasia.

In summary:

Our Society is in good enthusiastic heart, financially sound, and looking forward to progress via the Select Committee and the engagement of politicians across all parties. It is clear from world trends that Physician Assisted Dying is going to happen one day and the signs indicate that this may not be as far away as we imagined. Keep up the good work.

Jack Havill President