

act branch news

No harm to others: my life, my dying
Dying with Dignity news from the ACT Branch
Vol. 5, No. 2, July 2010

The next General Meeting for 2010 will be held on Thursday,
15 July, 2 pm, at The Weston Club, Liardet Street, Weston.

Speaker: **Richard Mills** DWDnsw Committee Member

Committee:
Jeanne Arthur, (Sec), jeanne_arthur@bigpond.com
John Brook, 6253 1128
Ian Hughes, ianhughes@dodo.com.au
Thelma Hunter, thelma.hunter@apex.net.au
Darrel Killen, deekay@grapevine.com.au
Clive Monty, camonty@netspeed.com.au
Barbara Mummy, 62473363, Treasurer
Beryl Rawson, Chair & Newsletter editor
br2005@netspace.net.au

Richard Mills is a former senior member of the Australian Public Service and has considerable experience in the workings of government (see further on DWDnsw website.) He has provided the following abstract of what he might talk about and raise for discussion: *After a brief look at encouraging developments overseas, in Australia and in NSW (and of course the ACT), I will note some longer-term pressures such as increasing health costs and changing demographics. I will then ask why politicians do not respond immediately to the overwhelming popular support for physician-assisted dying.*

I would like to offer some thoughts and have the benefit of your views on how to put DWD on the public and the government agenda. Who are our likely allies and opponents? Can rational debate alone counter emotional and ideological opposition? Should we focus on encouraging a surge of grass-roots support or public endorsement by prominent citizens and community groups? What are the best ways to do this? How important is it to have champions at the political level?

Finally, I will talk about the process of drafting legislation and what kinds of fundamental decisions we need to make on such aspects as who should be covered, what role should be played by doctors and what kinds of safeguards there should be.'

He wishes to encourage contributions from members. Also present will be DWDnsw's newly appointed community organiser, Diana Covell, who will be working two days a week on mobilising support for our cause. The talk will be followed by questions and discussion and then there will be coffee and tea available to continue informal discussion.

COME PREPARED TO CONTRIBUTE YOUR IDEAS.

- **Annual General Meeting, 2010** will be held at The Weston Club on November 18.

Do let Committee members know of any issues which you would like raised. In line with our recent practice, there will be no invited speaker, allowing maximum time for general discussion.

PUT THE DATE IN YOUR DIARIES!

- **Activities this autumn**

This has been a busy period for DWD-ACT, with Senator Bob Brown's public meeting on March 16, Seniors Week March 22-25, and our General Meeting on April 15. For our public activities, we have had valuable support of various kinds from DWDnsw.

1. On March 16, DWD-ACT organised a public forum, assisted by the ACT Greens, where Bob Brown addressed a packed audience at the ACT Legislative Assembly. It was a lively meeting, with Senator Brown handling questions and contributions with his usual aplomb. He spoke on a wide range of issues associated with 'Dying with Dignity', and particularly the pieces of legislation coming forward in State Parliaments to legalise VE in some form. His own bill, *Restoring Territory Rights (Voluntary Euthanasia Legislation) Bill 2008*, languishes in the Australian Parliament for lack of Government initiative to allow it to be brought forward for further discussion. Your Committee has written to the Prime Minister and to the Leader of the Government in the Senate (Sen. Chris Evans), asking for the Bill to come forward and for a conscience vote to be allowed.

We have also sent all ACT members form letters addressed to the Prime Minister and Sen. Evans on which you might like to model your own personal letters – or which you can forward using your own name. This will help keep up visibility of the issue and maintain awareness of our concern.

The Brown Bill is of particular concern to ACT members because it is a matter of ACT autonomy in such issues, seeking to give citizens of the ACT the same rights as citizens of the states to have such legislation proposed and discussed.

2. As part of ACT Seniors' Week, DWD-ACT had a stall at Seniors Expo on March 25 at the Old Bus Depot, Kingston. Committee members Jeanne and Clive did most of the work on the day, being at the stall from 10am to 3 pm. Information leaflets and membership forms were available, and we are discussing what further material might be useful and attractive next year. Suggestions welcome!

Did you pick up a carry bag from another stall which had material which we might adapt for our own purposes?

3. At the General Meeting on April 15, Emma Awizen, Coordinator of *Respecting Patients' Choices*, based at The Canberra Hospital, spoke on this program whereby patients' advance directives and other wishes are recorded when they enter hospital.

It was a lively meeting, with lots of questions and discussion. Emma reminded us of the importance of having health directives/advance directives and gave an excellent presentation on the procedures which needed to be followed to register these directives with the hospital. She distributed information sheets and relevant registration forms.

- **Senate Inquiry into Suicide**

We remain concerned that the Senate Inquiry has such limited terms of reference and that its timetable keeps being extended. Committee member Darrel has provided this report:

The ACT Branch made an early submission (No 6) to the Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs after it decided to Inquire into Suicide in Australia. The Terms of Reference were determined last September at a period when courts on both sides of Australia were grappling with the inadequacies of legislative guidance in dealing with individuals who *desired to end their lives*: the much publicized Rossiter case in Western Australia where a 49 year old paraplegic requested successfully disconnection of his feeding tube; and in NSW where the Supreme Court was able to decide that a Jehovah's Witness adherent did have the right to refuse treatment on the basis of an advance care directive which he had executed well before entering hospital ((*Hunter New England Area Health Service vs A.*)

And for good measure we had in the ACT Supreme Court application by ACT Health seeking guidance over a schizophrenia sufferer's desire to be allowed to starve to death. This was disallowed on grounds of lack of mental competence

These currently prominent issues seemed unrecognized in the Committee's lengthy terms of reference and the ACT Branch's submission expressed the criticism that an inquiry into suicide should be undertaken, which showed more explicit awareness of the problems of the ageing and the afflicted.

Since then there has been a very large number of submissions by organizations and individuals. The 'usual suspects' are to the fore but there have been a number from others, including by members of DWD. The submissions can now be read by accessing the Senate Committee Inquiry into Suicide in Australia. An outstanding one by the trailblazing Marshall Perron is worthy of attention.

http://www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/clac_ctte/suicide/index.htm

The date for the Committee's report has been extended to 24 June but in view of repeated extension of the date for receipt of submissions (at time of writing 17 June) it seems likely that it may be extended further. The Report of the Committee, chaired by Sen. Rachel Siewert (Greens, WA), is awaited with interest.

- **Christians' support for Voluntary Euthanasia**

As noted in a previous newsletter, there is a well organised group, *Christians for VE*, based in South Australia under the leadership of Ian Wood. They invite Australia-wide

membership (no fee) to support campaigns for VE legislation, irrespective of members' personal religious or other affiliations.

<http://www.christiansforve.org.au>

Our member Joon Garfit has provided some examples of the active correspondence on VE in the Quaker journal, *The Australian Friend*, in last year's September and December issues. The editor of the journal introduced this correspondence thus: *Recently, several Friends have received this e-mailed message, We understand that it was addressed to: "Christians who believe that, as a demonstration of love and compassion, those with terminal or hopeless illness should have the option of a pain-free, peaceful and dignified death with legal voluntary euthanasia"*. Contact Ian Wood email: ChristiansforVE@westnet.com.au

The writer suggested signing a letter to Members of Parliament in Australia, and generally making it known that many Christians support the choice for voluntary euthanasia, holding it to be consistent with Jesus' message of love and compassion.

The message evoked this response from Ian Waugh, of Queensland Regional meeting. Ed.

Ian Waugh's letter identified him as 'a physician of many years' experience'. He supported good palliative care, and distinguished between 'easing a death' and 'assisted-suicide'.

But a subsequent letter from SA members made the case for 'the option for legal help to put an end to our daily struggle and dependence on others' (with personal details included). The letters are too long to reproduce here, but a few copies will be made for consultation at the next General Meeting.

- **A possible reading list**

The Committee is beginning to put together a reading list which some members have found useful and interesting in thinking about the complexities of VE and end-of-life options. It is still a draft list, and will be updated as we receive more suggestions. See your July DWDnsw Newsletter for list.

We think that such a list would be useful to have available whenever we have other material to distribute to members and the general public.

DO LET US HAVE ITEMS WHICH YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD!

Note also that there is much useful information in back issues of the DWD/VES Newsletter, including brief articles and comments by members and medics. See, for example, the transcript of Dr Rodney Syme's talk pages 2 - 7 in the issue of March 2009.

DWDnsw also publish Fact Sheets, available via the post (Tel: 9212 4782) or on-line, e.g. No.14 is on the Swiss organization DIGNITAS, which includes eight additional sources of on-line information.

Information about recommended reading lists is also available on the DWDnsw website:

<http://www.dwdnsw.org.au/ves/index.php/index/books>

Any member who would like to suggest items for the ACT Newsletter is invited to contact the Editor or other members of the Committee (contact details above).