

Frequently Asked Questions



Who is Dying with Dignity Victoria (DWDV)?

Founded in 1974, Dying With Dignity Victoria (DWDV) is a membership-based charitable organisation, pursuing public policies and laws in Victoria to enhance self-determination and dignity at the end-of-life. DWDV's purpose is to relieve distress, helplessness and suffering for Victorians with untreatable, painful or terminal illnesses. In achieving its purpose, DWDV:

- supports end-of-life choices for people with untreatable, painful or terminal illnesses, and provides support to their families and carers;
- provides information, education and advice related to end-of-life choices to support people with untreatable, painful or terminal illnesses and the broader Victorian community;
- monitors and reports on outcomes and effects of end-of-life legislation and the quality of services provided for end-of life-care.

What is Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD)?

Voluntary Assisted Dying offers another legal end-of-life option to competent adults with a terminal or advanced incurable illness that creates intolerable, unrelievable suffering. Although palliative care provides a great deal of support and pain relief, in some cases it is simply not enough.

DWDV believes that VAD is a dignified and reasonable choice for people to make when their medical conditions result in untreatable and incurable suffering and pain. We know that individuals are greatly comforted by the knowledge that assisted dying is an option they may choose. This is of great psychological benefit as many individuals are deeply distressed when they consider the likely manner of their impending death.

Having a choice means having control. Many people dealing with traumatic illness and suffering feel they are losing control of their situation and their own self. End-of-life choices, which include Voluntary Assisted Dying, can restore a sense of agency over their own lives.

What support is there for Voluntary Assisted Dying?

Voluntary Assisted Dying is a choice of compassion and is not a partisan issue. Victoria's VAD laws passed in 2017 with strong support from across the Parliament. The support for VAD in the community is very strong; polls across the past 20 years indicate that Australians are very much in favour of VAD, showing a 75% support rate.¹ There is evidence that public support continues to climb, due to witnessing the safe and compassionate implementation of VAD laws and potentially knowing someone who has benefitted from them, with more recent surveys estimating support to be 80-85%.

¹ Go Gentle Dementia Report: Kresin T, Hawgood J, De Leo D, Varghese F (2021) Attitudes and Arguments in the Voluntary Assisted Dying Debate in Australia: What are they and how have they evolved over time?

How do Victoria's VAD laws compare to those of other Australian states and territories?

Victoria was the first state in Australia to pass VAD laws in 2017, which came into effect in 2019. Since then, all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory have followed suit. As a result, the once "groundbreaking" laws in Victoria have become a "more conservative model" when compared to the more progressive legislation of the other states and the ACT.

The five year review of the Act identified a number of areas where the Victorian legislation can be improved to better meet the needs of Victorians who may wish to access VAD, as well as the needs of their families and carers. The Victorian government, in accepting the findings of the review, committed to bring Victoria's Voluntary Assisted Dying legislation into closer alignment with other Australian jurisdictions.

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What changes are being proposed?

The Department of Health's Centre for Evaluation and Research Evidence reviewed the operation of the first four years of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017. The review found that VAD is working as intended by providing a safe and compassionate end-of-life choice to eligible Victorians, and made five recommendations to continue to improve access to VAD and the experience of Victorians who choose this end-of-life option. The recommendations are:

1. Increase the provision of sector guidance and build on approaches to continuous improvement.
2. Enhance community awareness of VAD and grief and bereavement supports.
3. Support the workforce to ensure VAD is accessible, viable and sustainable.
4. Consider enhancements to the statewide service models to meet anticipated future demand.
5. Advocate to the Commonwealth Government for greater federal support for VAD.

The Government accepted all five recommendations and indicated its intention is to bring the Victorian Act into closer alignment with other Australian jurisdictions, including through the following:

- Removing the gag clause that prevents doctors from telling their patients about VAD.
- Extending prognosis eligibility from 6 months to 12 months for all VAD applicants.
- Making residency requirements more inclusive.
- Simplifying VAD assessment and permit processes to reduce delays.
- Requiring doctors who are conscientious objectors to provide minimum VAD information to patients.
- Other changes that have proven to be safe and compassionate in other jurisdictions.

What is DWDV's experience with Voluntary Assisted Dying?

DWDV advocated for legislation to make Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) a legal end-of-life choice in Victoria. Following implementation of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Act 2017 (the Act) in 2019, we have sought to support those seeking VAD and those who provide the service, while also seeking to inform the public of options now available.

Our board includes medical practitioners with significant experience providing VAD in Victoria, and people with lived experience of supporting a family member to access VAD. It also includes people who have witnessed deaths in terrible circumstances before VAD was available, and a person with a family member unable to access VAD due to dementia, despite completing an Advance Care Directive requesting VAD while they still had decisional capacity.

DWDV is the first port of call for many people making general enquiries about VAD and for people traversing the process, their families and other support people. For more information about our role and our feedback on the operation of the VAD Act, see our submission to the Five year review.



What do DWDV, VAD medical practitioners, patients and their loved ones think of these proposed changes?

DWDV supports the proposed amendments to Victoria's VAD legislation and believes they will contribute positively to improving the experience of Victorians who would consider VAD as an end-of-life option and for those who are then deemed eligible and must navigate the process.

Trained Voluntary Assisted Dying medical providers have also expressed strong support for the changes: "The proposed amendments represent a welcome evolution in the ability of the VAD scheme to safely and responsibly meet the articulated needs of the Victorian community" said Dr Nick Carr.

Patients and their loved ones have responded very positively to the announcement.