



Annual Report

2021

Australia embraces Voluntary Assisted Dying

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SPARKING A BETTER CONVERSATION
ABOUT END OF LIFE





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A Message from Andrew Denton



2021 was indeed the year Australia embraced end-of-life choice. That humane Voluntary Assisted Dying laws have passed in five Australian states – three this year alone, with NSW and the Territories also within reach – is little short of astounding.

I urge you to take a moment to celebrate the

achievements detailed in these pages – the result of decades of hard work by individuals, groups and dedicated supporters like you.

Of course, the fight is not yet over. In NSW, reform is by no means guaranteed, with legislation still to pass the Upper House (where numbers remain tight). In the Territories, VAD law requires a change of heart from the federal parliament – something that will likely come only with a change of government, Labor having pledged in-principle support for Territories' rights on VAD.

Passing laws, however, is just a first step. We now have the task of defending them.

Powerful forces, including the leadership of the Catholic Church and many within the medical professions, remain staunchly opposed to the idea of self-determination at the end of life. These anti-choice warriors may have lost the latest battle but they haven't given up on the war. Anyone who has watched them challenge abortion rights in the US knows they do not tire. But nor do we. We will be watching and challenging any attempts to chip away at VAD laws, or to restrict access for the very people they are designed to help.

VAD is, and always will be, an option taken by a tiny minority. This is in part because, under the emerging Australian model of VAD, eligibility is tightly restricted. But it is also because asking for medical assistance to die is never easy. As terminally ill Victorians seeking VAD explained to me while recording the *Better Off Dead* podcast, the ultimate safeguard

in this law is an invisible one: The unimaginable courage and determination required to choose to leave behind everything you know and love.

As we look to 2022 and beyond – to a time when all Australians with terminal illness will have access to more compassionate end-of-life choices – we must continue to provide education and assistance to individuals and families who choose the VAD path.

And not just VAD. We, all of us, as individuals, need to be at the centre of the important decision concerning our deaths, just as we seek to be throughout our lives. My hope is that it becomes the norm to discuss, plan and take charge of our own endings. And that we all – not just the terminally ill – reach a point where we can talk about the grand finale of our lives as we would any other major life event.

As the legislative battle recedes, Go Gentle aims to put its resources towards supporting and informing these conversations – not only within the general public, but also across the medical community.

Our inspiration for this evolving direction comes from role models like Dr Rodney Syme, who sadly died in October. Rodney did more than any other individual for the rights of the terminally ill in this country (see page 30). In his decades-long VAD advocacy, Rodney didn't care about medical tradition, or the status quo, or even threats of gaol. He cared about what was just and right.

We seek to carry on Rodney's work: To ensure barriers to VAD access are removed; that VAD choice itself is de-stigmatised; and that the people who make this choice and their families are guided and supported through every step, including bereavement. This will require asking deeper questions about what palliative and end-of-life care really means, and about the nature of suffering.

Challenging the status quo, if it's to be effective, needs each one of us to play our part. I hope I can count on your ongoing support to continue to improve the conversation around death and dying in our country.

– Andrew Denton, Founder

A Message from the CEO



This year was significant for many reasons, not in the least because it marked a special milestone – our fifth anniversary.

Five years ago, I remember bumping into a podcast called *Better off Dead* by Andrew Denton. Hailing from the Netherlands, I knew several people who had chosen assisted deaths

and I understood how important choice and control could be for those with a terminal illness. After listening to four episodes, I was so moved I wrote to Andrew, offering help should he ever need it. Soon after, I received a call.

A few months later I found myself part of a small team setting up Go Gentle Australia and fighting for an assisted dying law in Victoria. At the time we thought it would be at least a decade before any Australian legislation would pass. However, the success of Victoria's landmark law in 2017 proved a bigger catalyst for change than anyone could have imagined. Its safe and compassionate operation has accelerated the understanding of the need for the reforms and offered peace of mind to those who questioned whether a VAD law would work as intended. Following Victoria's lead, Western Australia passed its VAD law in 2019.

In 2021, Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland all debated and endorsed their own legislation, and by the end of the year NSW's Lower House had passed a bill that will now move to the Legislative Council for consideration in 2022. The Northern Territory and ACT, too, built significant momentum toward overturning an archaic federal law that has prevented them from even debating assisted dying.

After a year in which Australia so resoundingly embraced voluntary assisted dying legislation, we now face the very real prospect of laws in every state and territory and better end of life choices for all eligible terminally ill people. Yes, the NSW bill must still pass through the Upper House, and the Territories will need all our collective support and determination to see their VAD hopes realised, but it is clear change is coming.

Five years ago, sitting in my car listening to the first episode of the *Better Off Dead* podcast, I could never have imagined being where we are now. As we look to 2022 and beyond, we are in the enviable position of having to reinvent and renew ourselves as an organisation to accommodate this extraordinary progress.

Our sincere thanks to all those who have helped us reach this point – our followers, generous backers, and grassroots advocates in every jurisdiction, without whose support none of this would have been possible. Particularly, we remember those for whom these reforms did not come soon enough. It is their memory that inspires us to continue the fight and to defend the progress already won.

One day, we or someone we love, may need these laws and I am grateful and proud to be part of the movement that has achieved such momentous change.

– Kiki Paul, CEO

Who We Are

Our Mission

To spark a better national conversation around death and dying, and end-of-life choices.

Our Objective

To help relieve the distress, helplessness and suffering experienced by Australians with untreatable or terminal illnesses, and their families and carers.

To achieve this we:

- Provide education for a better conversation about death and dying and end-of-life options (within current legal frameworks)
- Act as a central point of connection for all voices supporting Voluntary Assisted Dying (VAD) and act as a representative of the community in educating and informing policy discussions on assisted dying approaches and best practices
- Create a central hub of information for all matters related to end-of-life conversations and choices

Strategies

- Create an ongoing national archive of testimonies from people living with a terminal illness, families, doctors and nurses
- Create an information bank about VAD laws and issues nationally and around the world
- Connect relevant medical, legal, political and community expertise around Australia
- Develop and provide educational resources and tools to improve the national conversation around death and dying
- Continuously evaluate and correct misinformation about VAD

Values

Go Gentle Australia is an organisation that values choice, respect, compassion and integrity.

CHOICE

We argue for the choice to decide what happens to us at the end of our lives, including not to be forced into avoidable suffering when we are at our most vulnerable.

RESPECT & COMPASSION

We respect the right of all Australians to hold differing religious, spiritual and secular beliefs. We treat everyone with respect and compassion.

INTEGRITY

We abide by strict standards of evidence gathering and only provide truthful information. We are open and honest about our positions and partnership, and always operate within the law.



Go Gentle Australia does not argue for a 'right to die'. We see death not as a right, but as a fact at the end of life. We are all in this together – we can help each other to go gently.



Photo by Damo Ngyuen

Our Team

Kiki Paul

CEO

After 20 years in financial services, Kiki has used her business experience in the not-for-profit sector. She has previously served on the board of the Hornsby Ku-ring-gai Women's Shelter, is now on the board of PANDIS and a founding director of Cancer Chicks. She joined Go Gentle Australia at its inception in 2016. She is passionate about social justice, equal opportunities and making the world a better place.

Frankie Bennett

PR & CAMPAIGNS MANAGER

Frankie joined GGA following the successful End of Life Choice referendum in New Zealand, where she was Assistant Campaign Manager. She has previously worked with Dignity in Dying in the UK and Compassion in Dying, their sister charity. She holds a Law degree from the London School of Economics.

Steve Offner

COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTOR

Steve joined GGA after more than a decade in corporate communications and a stint as media adviser for the Australian Marriage Equality Campaign. He coordinates GGA's national communications strategy, media engagement, and GGA's digital and social media platforms. He holds a Master of International Relations from UNSW and a Bachelor of Communications/Journalism from Charles Sturt University.

Renae Titchmarsh

DESIGN & PROJECTS

Renae's skills as a graphic designer have made her an invaluable asset to the team. Renae is responsible for ensuring brand recognition and consistency across all GGA assets. She is passionate about accessibility, legibility and functionality when designing. Outside of GGA, Renae volunteers for local community organisations.



Our Board

GGA's board members are all volunteers who bring significant experience from their fields of expertise. The Board meets monthly to guide and assist the organisation to achieve its strategic goals.

Peter Thompson

Peter has extensive experience in commercial and corporate law, specialising in the entertainment and media industries.

Andrew Denton

Andrew is one of Australian media's genuinely creative forces with a career covering radio, television and film. He is the creator of the podcast series *Better Off Dead*, investigating why good people die bad deaths in Australia.

Tanya Jones

Tanya is a strategic communications professional with over 20 years of experience running large corporate, brand and political advertising campaigns.

Craig Stafford







Craig has worked in the finance industry for some three decades, spending most of that time researching, and helping clients invest in, listed companies in Australia and throughout the world. He is passionate about health, education and sport. Craig is currently a Founding Partner and Head of Research at Barrenjoey Capital Partners.

Brian Owler

Brian Owler is a neurosurgeon who treats both cranial and spinal conditions of adults and children. He chaired the Expert Ministerial Advisory Panel on Voluntary Assisted Dying in Victoria and is a past president of the AMA.



2021 Achievements

-  **65,391 supporters (+350%).**
-  **17.6K Facebook followers (+34%).**
-  **744 donors this financial year (+36%).**
-  **3 additional states with VAD laws.**
VAD bill passes NSW Lower House.
-  **9.3 million Australians with current access to VAD.**
A further 7.5 million to gain access within 18 months.
-  **2nd Season of Better Off Dead podcast launched.**

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Thank you Go Gentle, your enduring and tangible support underpins great VAD wins in every state.
Therese McLean, Queensland



2021 Highlights

13 JAN – GGA publishes its first blog of 2021 predicting this will be “the year Australia embraces Voluntary Assisted Dying”.

20 FEB – Hundreds of Tasmanians turn out for a candlelight vigil at Parliament House in Hobart ahead of the resumption of debate on the VAD bill.

24 FEB – An expert panel from the University of Tasmania endorses the state's VAD bill saying it has some of the “most rigorous safeguards in the world”.

23 MARCH – Tasmania becomes the third Australian state to legalise voluntary assisted dying for the terminally ill after the lower house endorses the VAD bill.

13 APRIL – GGA, Andrew Denton and The Wheeler Centre launch a 14-part second season of the podcast *Better Off Dead*, detailing the stories behind the operation of Victoria's landmark VAD law.

6 MAY – South Australia's Upper House passes the VAD bill 14 votes to 7.

25 MAY – Queensland Premier Annastacia Palaszczuk releases the Law Reform Commission's draft VAD legislation, saying “Queenslanders have spoken – the time is right”.

28 MAY – 500 VAD supporters gather on the steps of Adelaide's Parliament for a candlelit vigil.

19 JUNE – Victoria marks two years since the enactment of its landmark Voluntary Assisted Dying law.

24 JUNE – South Australia becomes the fourth state to legalise Voluntary Assisted Dying as both houses of parliament ratify the VAD bill.

30 JUNE – GGA hosts a *How to Engage Your MP on Voluntary Assisted Dying* webinar, attracting 200 Queenslanders.

1 JULY – Western Australia's VAD law comes into effect, following an 18-month implementation period, making it the second Australian state with an active law.

30 JULY – 63-year-old terminally ill Indigenous woman Mary-Ellen Passmore becomes the first identified Western Australian to use the state's VAD law.

5 AUG – Northern Territory Senator Sam McMahon introduces a private member's bill in the Senate to restore the right of the NT to make decisions on issues such as VAD.

9 AUG – A new poll finds a clear majority of Australians (60%) across the political spectrum support the push to restore Territory rights to legislate for VAD.

23 AUG – Federal Labor Leader Anthony Albanese backs moves to restore Territory rights to legislate on VAD.

26 AUG – The federal parliament invites public submissions to an inquiry into the Ensuring Northern Territory Rights Bill 2021.

30 AUG – An alliance of 28 groups representing doctors, nurses, ambulance officers and terminally ill Queenslanders writes to state MPs urging them to support the VAD bill.

1 SEPT – Queensland advocates Tanya Battel and Fiona Jacobs hand a 111,000-signature petition in favour of VAD to Deputy Premier Steven Miles.

5 SEPT – A coalition of Queensland community groups prints a full-page ad in the *Courier Mail* to refute “inaccurate and misleading” claims by the Catholic Church that people and workplaces will be forced to participate in VAD.

8 SEPT – The VAD Review Board's report on the first two years of assisted dying in Victoria confirms the law continues to operate safely as a compassionate end-of-life option.

10 SEPT – The Queensland Nurses and Midwives Union releases a poll and survey which show 87% of their members support a VAD law.

11 SEPT – First responders publish a full-page ad in the *Courier Mail* in support of the VAD bill, saying 7 Queenslanders with a terminal illness take their lives every month in the absence of a legal option to end their suffering.

13 SEPT – More than 300 VAD supporters rally in Brisbane ahead of the start of Queensland's parliamentary debate on VAD.

17 SEPT – Queensland's parliament passes the VAD law 61 votes to 30, making it the fifth state to legalise voluntary assisted dying.

11 OCT – National coronial data reveals that one in five (20%) suicides of people over 40 in NSW in 2019 were by people with a terminal or debilitating medical condition or who had experienced a significant decline in physical health.

12 OCT – A petition of more than 100,000 signatures is delivered to NSW parliament in support of the VAD bill.

14 OCT – The Older Persons Advocacy Network (OPAN) announces its support for the NSW VAD bill.

15 OCT – GGA and DWD NSW publish the booklet *State of Suffering*, cataloguing hundreds of testimonies of damage done in the absence of a NSW VAD law.

20 OCT – VAD activist Dr Rodney Syme dies and is remembered as a compassionate and fearless man who fought tirelessly for the rights of terminally ill people.

7 NOV – A year after its referendum, New Zealand enacts the End of Life Choice law, allowing people with a terminal illness to access VAD.

11 NOV – Terminally ill Sydney woman Judith Daley writes a withering opinion piece in the *Daily Telegraph* admonishing NSW political leaders for their inaction on VAD.

12 NOV – The NSW lower house begins debate on Independent MP Alex Greenwich's VAD bill.

22 NOV – Council of the Ageing NT's petition is tabled in federal parliament, seeking to reverse a decades-old federal law that prohibits the Territories from enacting VAD laws.

26 NOV – The NSW Lower House passes the VAD bill by 52 votes to 32.

30 NOV – The Territories rights bill stalls in the federal Senate after debate is interrupted "due to time constraints".

3 DEC – Our *Better Off Dead* podcast wins two Silver Australian Podcast Awards for Moment of the Year Podcast and Best Documentary Podcast.

8 DEC – GGA gives evidence before the NSW Parliamentary Standing Committee on Law and Justice for their inquiry into the VAD bill.



2021: the year Australia embraces VAD

As 2021 began we asked a provocative question: could this be the year Australia embraces voluntary assisted dying? By year's end the answer was a categorical 'yes': three more states (Tasmania, South Australia and Queensland) passed VAD laws and a fourth, NSW, moved a step closer by passing a bill through the state's lower house. With VAD laws already in place in Victoria and Western Australia, some 17 million Australians now have access to safe, compassionate choice at the end of life – the result of hard-fought advocacy and determination.

“

This is not an issue that is going to go away... the reality is that this is a 21st century issue that we must address.

**The Hon. Vickie Chapman MP,
SA Deputy Premier and Attorney General**



23 March

Tasmania

Tasmania made history in March becoming the third Australian state to give its citizens access to legal voluntary assisted dying. The Lower House voted 16 to 6 in favour of MLC Mike Gaffney's End of Life Choice Bill.

An 18-month implementation period will see eligible Tasmanians able to access the law in October 2022.



24 June

South Australia

In June, after 25 years and 17 attempts, South Australia's parliament overwhelmingly ratified the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill becoming the fourth state to legalise medical assistance to die.

Eligible terminally ill South Australians will be able to access the law in early 2023, after an 18-month implementation period.



17 September

Queensland

After a four-year process and numerous inquiries and reports, the Queensland parliament voted decisively 61-30 to pass the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill. The Queensland law, widely seen as the most equitable and progressive of its kind, will come into effect in early 2023.



26 November

New South Wales

Hopes for an assisted dying law in NSW received a boost in November when the state's Lower House passed the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill by 52 votes to 32.

It was the furthest a VAD bill had ever progressed in NSW. Australia's most populous state is now a step closer to joining every other state in passing a VAD law. The bill now moves to the Upper House in 2022.

Awareness and Health Promotion

Our mission is to improve the national conversation about death and dying, and in particular create an open dialogue about the need for kinder, more compassionate end-of-life choices.

Biggest Record of Support

Recognising the ongoing limitations imposed by Covid-19, in February we launched the Biggest Record of Support to inform as many Australians as possible about VAD laws and give them ways to get involved with our work. The campaign attracted more than 47,500 signups and in Queensland and NSW alone the exercise added almost 30,000 new supporters to our lists ahead of those states' parliamentary debates. This more than tripled our community.

Communicating our stories

2021 again showed the importance of storytelling in communicating awareness about the need for end-of-life choice. Throughout the year, our website and social media platforms proved vital in demonstrating the importance of end-of-life conversations, planning ahead, and the need for VAD laws.

Helping individuals give voice to their own experiences – and the experiences of loved ones – at the end of life was crucial to the successful campaigns for VAD law reform and was cathartic for the storyteller.

In the first half of the year, we collected and published case studies of end-of-life suffering in Tasmania and South Australia and helped facilitate factual and balanced media discussions of the issue during those states' parliamentary debates on VAD.

In August and September, amid Covid-19 lockdowns, we collected more than 300 case studies of suffering in Queensland. More than 50 of these were published in the media ahead of the Queensland VAD debate. In concert with Dying with Dignity (DWD) NSW, a similar number of media stories were sourced and published in NSW.

In October, we partnered with DWD NSW to publish *State of Suffering*, a booklet of more than 150 testimonies of the terrible trauma happening in NSW in the absence of a VAD law. The booklet was sent to every NSW MP and the case studies within were referred to numerous times during the NSW Lower House debate.

We also used our social media presence to keep the public informed of the progress of important developments in end-of-life policy around Australia and the world. This included live-tweeting every Australian parliamentary VAD debate in 2021.

Better Off Dead

In April, GGA teamed with Andrew Denton and the Wheeler Centre to launch the second season of the podcast *Better Off Dead*. The 14-part podcast tells the stories behind the operation of Victoria's landmark Voluntary Assisted Dying law. The podcast, which has been listened to approximately 50,000 times, raised awareness throughout the community of the safe and compassionate operation of Victoria's assisted dying law and was a valuable educational resource for MPs in South Australia, Queensland and NSW. In December, *Better Off Dead* received two silver medals in the Australian Podcast Awards.



Live at The Wheeler Centre. From left to right; Paul Barclay, Andrew Denton, Ron Poole, Betty King and Phillip Parente. Photo by TJ Garvie Photography

Panel Discussion

Last words – Voluntary Assisted Dying

In May, GGA partnered with The Wheeler Centre and ABC RN's Big Ideas on a panel discussion about Victoria's voluntary assisted dying law.

Hosted by Paul Barclay from ABC RN, the panel featured terminally ill Victorian man Ron Poole, oncologist and VAD practitioner Dr Phillip Parente, chair of the VAD Review Board Betty King and GGA's Andrew Denton, discussing what effect the VAD law has had on end-of-life care for terminally ill Victorians. Is the law working as planned, and is there room for improvement?

A recording of the public event became a stand-alone episode in the podcast *Better Off Dead* and was broadcast nationally by ABC RN.

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**It takes determination.
I'm in awe of all of these people
that go through it.
I just admire their courage;
I admire their strength.**

**Justice (retired) Betty King,
Outgoing Chair of Victoria's VAD Review Board**

Research and Advice

As an expert advisory and health promotion charity, we promote information about end-of-life care based on established facts and peer-reviewed research. Our evidence-based interventions help to correct misinformation about end-of-life choices and provide valuable resources for medical, legal, political and community leaders.

The Better Off Dead podcast

At the beginning of 2021, as at least three states prepared to debate VAD laws, GGA continued a major research project to gather evidence relating to the operation of Victoria's landmark voluntary assisted dying law.

In partnership with The Wheeler Centre, GGA founding director Andrew Denton, together with GGA staff, interviewed dozens of Victorians with intimate knowledge of the VAD process. These interviews formed the backbone of a 14-episode second season of the podcast *Better Off Dead*.

The podcast played a major role in reassuring MPs and the medical community that a VAD law can be well drafted and safely and compassionately implemented, and was well received by the public.

Parliamentary debates

In early 2021, GGA continued to support Tasmanian MPs with evidence-based research and advice as parliament resumed debate on MLC Mike Gaffney's voluntary assisted dying bill. GGA's submission to the University of Tasmania's review into the bill was widely cited and our rebuttal of opponents' unsubstantiated claims about VAD contributed to one of the most balanced, respectful and fact-based parliamentary debates on assisted dying to date.

In April, May and June, GGA provided briefings, resources and advice to MPs debating South Australia's VAD bill. With the SA bill mirroring Victoria's law, GGA's research and resulting *Better Off Dead* podcast proved particularly relevant.

In May and June GGA organised two online forums to allow SA MPs to talk directly to experts from Victoria who had personal experience with the VAD process.

In July, August and September GGA provided comprehensive briefings to MPs in Queensland and NSW ahead of parliamentary debates in those states. GGA organised several forums involving

experts from Victoria and facilitated people with a terminal illness, their families and carers, to share their stories.

Parliamentary inquiries

Throughout the year, GGA's fact-based research provided a solid basis for clear and reliable evidence to inform policy makers. At the core was a reminder to MPs that, when framing legislation, to never lose sight of the aim of VAD itself; to support a person – who is already in the advanced stages of a terminal illness and who is suffering intolerably – to control the manner of their death. This is for whom VAD laws are written, not medical professionals or institutions.

In July, GGA provided a lengthy submission to the Queensland Parliament's Health and Environment Committee in response to the draft Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill. Our submission reiterated GGA's support for the bill written by the Queensland Law Reform Commission, noting that the QLRC had done a thorough job of canvassing lessons and experiences from other jurisdictions to create an optimal VAD law for Queensland. GGA urged the committee to avoid recommending major changes to the bill and to strengthen provisions preventing institutions from blocking access to VAD. We also stressed the need for Queensland, as one of the most geographically diverse states, to address Commonwealth law restrictions on the use of Telehealth in VAD assessments. Off the back of the submission, GGA's CEO Kiki Paul was invited to give evidence to the committee during public hearings held in August.

Also in August, GGA submitted a response to the federal Senate's inquiry into the Ensuring Northern Territory Rights Bill 2021. GGA urged the Commonwealth to broaden the scope of the bill to include the ACT and to remove the ban on both territories' ability to debate voluntary assisted dying laws for themselves.

In November, GGA finalised a 43-page submission to an Upper House Inquiry into the Provisions of the NSW Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021. The submission stressed that NSW parliament

was not breaking new ground on assisted dying laws within the Australian context and urged members to look to the more than two years of evidence around the safe and compassionate application of the law in Victoria. Based on the submission, GGA appeared before the Standing Committee on Law and Justice to give evidence during public hearings held in December.

Countering misinformation

GGA believes it is essential to respond quickly and robustly to the most egregious and misleading public statements about VAD.

GGA used media and social media to correct the record when dubious claims were aired. In March, we assisted Neil Francis from Dying for Choice to rebut claims made by VAD opponents that Victoria's suicide rate had gone up and that the assisted dying law was to blame. GGA described the claim as demonstrably untrue and a "kindergarten-level attempt at deception". It is one thing to have a view, quite another to distort evidence then put that distortion in the public square.

Minimising and trivialising the experiences of people who have experienced or witnessed end-of-life suffering is a common tactic used by VAD opponents. In September, GGA's founding director Andrew Denton responded to claims by columnist Noel Pearson in *The Australian* that Queensland MPs with experience of end-of-life suffering had displayed "confected emotion" during that state's voluntary assisted dying debate.

Denton countered Mr Pearson's assertions saying: "In dismissing Queensland's politicians as 'actors winning baubles' for bearing witness to [end-of-life] trauma, he not only minimises, he also misunderstands the seriousness of their purpose."

International contributions

GGA continued to share its experience with end-of-life choice advocates around the world. We assisted UK's Dignity in Dying to contact experts from Victoria to speak at parliamentary forums, and in January we wrote a lengthy submission to Ireland's parliamentary inquiry into the Dying with Dignity Bill 2020.

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It was our pleasure to share Robbie's story. He was brave and a person who knew what he wanted. I thank Andrew for taking the time to listen.

Michelle Calliste, whose son, Robbie 34, was one of the youngest people to access Victoria's VAD law. Robbie's story was one of many shared in Better Off Dead.



Artwork by Megan Herbert

Podcast

Better Off Dead

In the first three months of the year, GGA wrapped up a major six-month research project to gather evidence relating to the first years of Victoria's pioneering voluntary assisted dying law.

Who sought to use it, and why? Who were the doctors stepping forward to help? And what were the experiences of the families whose dying loved ones had taken up the VAD option?

To provide answers, Andrew Denton spoke to dozens of Victorians with intimate knowledge of the VAD process. The interviews – with the terminally ill and their families and carers, doctors, pharmacists, care navigators and members of the Voluntary Assisted Dying Review Board – led to a second season of the podcast *Better Off Dead*, which was launched in April in partnership with the Wheeler Centre.

Much had changed regarding end-of-life choice since the release of the podcast's first season in 2016. Unlike many podcasts, which seek to reach as wide an audience as possible, the second season of *Better Off Dead* had as its primary objective a very specific group: MPs in South Australia, Queensland and NSW who were all debating the legalisation of VAD in 2021.

A secondary audience was health professionals across Australia, with the aim of sparking deeper questions about what end-of-life care really means, and about the nature of suffering.

The podcast was warmly received. Medical groups such as Nursing Australia, the Australian Health Practitioner Regulatory Agency, and the Clinical Oncology Society of Australia used it as a springboard to a wider conversation within their communities, and perhaps most importantly, MPs listened to, shared, and referenced the podcast in every parliamentary debate.

What we learned from this research and interactions will inform our work for many years to come.

As a fitting end to the year, in December the podcast received two silver medals in the Australian Podcast Awards.

The costs associated with producing Better of Dead Season 2 have been fully covered by a generous supporter.

Education

Good decisions at the end of life require access to reliable information. Creating trustworthy educational resources for the community and parliamentarians is central to our mission to spark better conversations about death and dying.

Educational materials

GGA continued to offer a range of free e-books and other resources to the public and other stakeholders via its website.

In August, we produced a briefing paper for Queensland MPs on institutional objection provisions in the state's proposed voluntary assisted dying law. The paper emphasised that individuals suffer in ways that institutions cannot and stressed that the ideology of religiously operated aged care homes, retirement villages and hospitals should not be prioritised over the rights and needs of patients.

Publications

In October, GGA comprehensively re-wrote the *Guide to the Debate Ahead on Voluntary Assisted Dying* and relaunched it as *Voluntary Assisted Dying: A Guide to the Debate in NSW*. The new iteration incorporated research material drawn from the podcast *Better Off Dead* and synthesised insights gained from previous VAD debates in five Australian states. The booklet was sent to every NSW MP ahead of the parliamentary debate on VAD.

Also in October, we partnered with DWD NSW to publish *State of Suffering*, a booklet of more than 150 testimonies of the terrible suffering happening in NSW in the absence of a VAD law. The booklet was sent to every NSW MP ahead of the Lower House debate on VAD to ensure they understood what it was they were voting to prevent – or allow to continue. Individual MPs referred to case studies from the booklet numerous times during the debate.

How to Engage Your MPs on Voluntary Assisted Dying

Educating the public about voluntary assisted dying laws and how constituents can most constructively have their views heard by their elected representatives continued to be an important facet of GGA's work. In June, we hosted a webinar *How to Engage Your MP on Voluntary Assisted Dying* attracting 200 participants from Queensland ahead of that state's parliamentary debate on VAD. We also published an accompanying 'Conversation Toolkit' to support people to start talking to their loved ones and MPs about voluntary assisted dying.

GGA used paid radio and newspaper advertising during the parliamentary debates in South Australia, Queensland and NSW to educate the public about the political decision-making process and to encourage supporters to attend rallies and to contact their MPs to support end-of-life choice. The ads and community response they provoked helped to remind MPs of the 80% public support for end-of-life choice and the urgency around the introduction of voluntary assisted dying laws.

Community Forums

One of GGA's central purposes is to help inform health professionals about the complexities of end-of-life conversations and care. The aim of our educational resources is to prompt health professionals to ask themselves deeper questions about what end-of-life care really means, and about the nature of suffering. Throughout the year, GGA director Andrew Denton made regular media appearances and joined medical groups to discuss the issue of end-of-life choice and GGA's work.

ADVERTISEMENT

Judith Daley, 77
Terminal lung cancer
Sydney

**Look me in the eye
and tell me I must suffer**

I'm Judith and I have terminal lung cancer.
I'm not scared of dying but I am afraid of *how* I die.
Every other state has passed a Voluntary Assisted Dying law so people like me have the choice to die peacefully, on our own terms.
But here in NSW, our political leaders Dominic Perrottet and Chris Minns are allowing delays.
I will have the best palliative care, but still face a death by suffocation, drowning in my own fluids.

Will you stand by and let me die like this?
Mr Perrottet and Mr Minns, I understand you oppose this bill – but don't be afraid of the debate.
You are leaders and I ask you to lead.
No more political games or delays, start the debate this week.
It is in your hands.

**Ask your NSW MP to let the debate happen
on Voluntary Assisted Dying.**

Dying with Dignity
New South Wales

Go Gentle Australia and Penny Hackett for Dying with Dignity NSW, Sydney

Scan the QR code to
contact your MP now
dwdnsw.gov.au/NoDelay

Advertising

Applying pressure

One of our key roles is to educate the public on voluntary assisted dying laws and the political process behind them. In 2021 we ran concerted advertising campaigns across print, radio and social media in NSW and Queensland to keep the public informed.

To counter threatened delays in the passage of the NSW bill, the late Judith Daley featured in a newspaper ad (above) urging political leaders to stop stalling parliamentary debate. Soon after the ad was published in Sydney's major metropolitan dailies, the bill was allocated time and passed the Lower House a few weeks later.

In Queensland, local newspaper and radio ads encouraged supporters to phone their MPs about VAD ahead of the parliamentary debate. We also leveraged digital advertising to target audiences whose MPs were undecided on the issue.

Finally, we published an open letter from the QLD4VAD Alliance challenging misleading claims by the Catholic Church. We also worked closely with first responders to promote in the media their support of VAD.

Operations

Our staff, resources and funds all work towards achieving our mission and objectives – to spark a better conversation about death and dying, and to help relieve distress, helplessness and suffering at the end of life.

Our team

In February, GGA welcomed Frankie Bennett as PR and Campaigns Manager, with responsibility for coordinating GGA's Queensland operations. Frankie had led New Zealand's successful Yes for Compassion campaign which saw 65.2% of New Zealanders endorse the End of Life Choices Act in a national referendum. Frankie was a welcome addition to the team and her candour and humour helped lighten a heavy work burden for existing staff.

The ongoing impact of Covid-19

The Covid-19 pandemic continued to impact the way GGA went about its work in 2021. Travel restrictions and lockdowns limited the scope of our 'boots on the ground' advocacy and awareness campaigns and forced us to focus our activities online.

Although the circumstances were challenging, we remained optimistic and committed to protecting the most vulnerable in our society, the terminally ill, who needed our support more than ever.

When NSW embarked on a second lockdown, we were able to quickly move to working from home. Working remotely for an extended period of time saw us master digital office spaces, such as Slack, WhatsApp and Zoom, although not without our fair share of technological mishaps.

Office space

As GGA looked to expand the scope of its operations and with an additional staff member, we secured larger office space in Sydney's CBD. Significantly, the new space is light and airy and offers an outlook over the city, providing an important emotional boost for staff.

Fundraising and philanthropy

Despite a fundraising environment that posed ongoing challenges due to Covid-19 restrictions, we continued relationships with key philanthropists who understand the importance of GGA's work. We were delighted to secure further contributions that will help ensure our long-term future. In May, we rolled out our end-of-financial-year fundraising campaign, featuring GGA supporters Liz Habermann, whose terminally ill son Rhys, 19, took his own life in South Australia in 2019 without access to legal voluntary assisted dying, and the family of 26-year-old Alex Blain whose death in 2021 in Victoria through voluntary assisted dying provided a stark contrast to Rhys's suffering.

In July we marked our fifth birthday with a Chuffed fundraising campaign aimed at highlighting our considerable achievements since 2016. We made a strategic decision to postpone other public fundraising initiatives and we were pleased to raise more than \$96K in public contributions for the year. We'd like to particularly mention all our regular givers, whose contributions provide GGA with a degree of funding certainty.

Financial Report

For the year ended 30 June 2021

Consolidated Statement of Surplus or Deficit

	2021	2020
Assets		
Current Assets	–	–
Cash on hand	593,318	271,206
Receivables	9,109	4,206
Other	3,200	7,633
Total Current Assets	605,627	283,045
Total Assets	605,627	283,045
Liabilities		
Current Liabilities		
Payables	15,732	10,398
Total Current Liabilities	15,732	10,398
Non Current Liabilities		
Other	–	3,760
Total Non Current Liabilities	–	3,760
Total Liabilities	15,732	14,158
Net Assets	589,895	268,887
Equity		
Current year earnings	321,008	401,961
Retained surplus	268,887	150,814
Total equity	589,995	552,775

Consolidated Statement of Financial Position

	2021	2020
Revenue	874,002	698,703
Administration expense	(51,297)	(66,938)
Program delivery costs	(441,774)	(816,263)
Employee benefits expenses	(59,923)	(99,390)
Current year surplus before income tax	321,008	(283,888)
Net current year surplus	321,008	(283,888)

People power

"Every win brings us closer to compassionate end-of-life-choice for all Australians."

Tasmanian VAD law a 'tipping point'

In 2019, dying of gastric cancer and in excruciating pain, Diane Gray's final wish was that Tasmania pass a voluntary assisted dying law.

"Sit with me during the last few days of my life, look me in the eyes, deny me [an end to] my suffering ... there is nothing humane about this ending," she wrote in a powerful letter to MPs.

Diane understood that any law would come too late for her, but would provide untold comfort to other terminally ill Tasmanians.

In March, Diane's wish was fulfilled when Tasmania became the third Australian state to pass a voluntary assisted dying law. MPs in the Lower House voted 16 to 6 in favour of the bill, following the lead of the Upper House, which had already passed the bill unopposed.

For Diane's daughters, Jacqui and Natalie Gray, it was an emotional culmination of two years of intense grassroots campaigning that mobilised an entire state to lobby for change.

"Mum, you are the spark that lit our fire," the sisters said of their mother's memory and the 'Your Choice Tasmania' campaign she inspired.

"The Tasmanian VAD law is Diane's legacy and the legacy of all loved ones who had died without access to a more compassionate end-of-life choice," the sisters said.

The significance of the bill cannot be overstated. The first non-government legislation to succeed in any Australian state, it also marked the first time a legislature anywhere in the world had unanimously endorsed a VAD law.

Credit goes to Independent MLC Mike Gaffney who drafted, championed and expertly guided the legislation in the Upper House, and to Liberal Member for Bass Sarah Courtney who took carriage of the bill in the Lower House. Solid support from Premier Peter Gutwein, numerous government ministers and from Labor and the Greens guaranteed the bill's passage.

Endorsement of the law from across the political spectrum reflected the formidable community support, which was expertly mobilised by the Gray sisters and Dying With Dignity Tasmania.

Go Gentle Australia was delighted to work closely with Mr Gaffney and local campaigners to provide resources and advice.

An 18-month implementation period will see eligible Tasmanians able to access the law in October 2022.

“

**This result is the legacy
of all our loved ones...
Mum, you are the spark
that lit our fire.**

**The Gray sister's tribute to
their mum Diane**





The Candles for Compassion vigil, organised by GGA and VADSA, drew 500 people from all over South Australia to the steps of Parliament House. Photo by Roy Vandervegt.

South Australia

"It showed how Parliament can and should be," said Labor MP Kyam Maher of the passing in June of South Australia's voluntary assisted dying law.

Parliament set aside years of acrimony and bitter politicking on the issue to overwhelmingly ratify the VAD Bill 2020 and become the fourth Australian state to legalise medical assistance to die.

Like the Tasmanian bill before it, SA's legislation began as a private member's bill drafted by Mr Maher. Notable features of the debate were the free vote given to all MPs, the respect shown on all sides and MPs' reliance on evidence.

Mr Maher paid tribute to local advocates: "This achievement was only possible due to the tireless and courageous work of people – many of whom were in their final days – in local communities across the state to build support and convince their local MPs to support the change."

Based on Victoria's landmark VAD Act, which has operated safely for more than two years, SA's law is similar to legislation passed in Western Australia and Tasmania and signifies

the emergence of an 'Australian model' for assisted dying legislation.

Go Gentle Australia's time spent speaking with MPs, our community advocacy and our evidence-based resources, including the *Better Off Dead* podcast and our e-books and submissions, were utilised extensively throughout the debate.

Central to the bill's success was a tenacious grassroots community campaign by Voluntary Assisted Dying SA (VADSA), led by Frances Coombe, Anne Bunning, Lainie Anderson and Justine Firth and supported by GGA.

Other tireless local advocates included Angie Miller from A Peaceful End, Ceara Rickard, Jacqui Possingham, Jan Kemble, Jane Qualmann, Kym Watson, Liz Habermann and Susie Byrne.

Eligible terminally ill South Australians will be able to access the law by the beginning of 2023, after an 18-month implementation period.



A boy places a candle at the Vigil for Voluntary Assisted Dying, Queensland Parliament House. Photo courtesy of QLD4VAD Alliance.

Queensland

In 2019 the *Brisbane Times* published a shocking headline sourced from coronial data: *'Every month, seven terminally ill people take their lives in Queensland'*.

That so many gravely ill Queenslanders had no legal option other than suicide to end their suffering was a devastating indictment.

Polling showed 86 per cent of the community believed Queensland could do better. The government of Annastacia Palaszczuk agreed.

In May 2021, following a lengthy parliamentary inquiry into voluntary assisted dying, the Labor government fulfilled an election promise and introduced a VAD bill to parliament. The bill, widely considered to be the most progressive of its kind in Australia, was the result of a forensic investigation and report from the state's Law Reform Commission and oversight from parliament's Health Committee.

In September, two years after the heartbreaking suicide headline, MPs from across the political spectrum voted VAD into law by 61 votes to 30. It made Queensland the fifth Australian state to endorse medical assistance to die and the third state to do so that year, following Tasmania and South Australia.

It was an incredible outcome, but success had not been guaranteed. Recognising the volatility of Queensland politics, GGA campaigned strongly, bringing on board a dedicated staff member, Frankie Bennett, from NZ's successful *Yes for Compassion* campaign, to coordinate efforts.

As anticipated, VAD opponents launched a coordinated scare campaign, stoking fears that palliative care was under threat, and that people and workplaces would be forced to participate in VAD against their wishes.

In response, GGA formed a 28-strong QLD4VAD Alliance of grassroots organisations, nurse and health worker unions,

first-responders, faith-based groups and older person's advocacy groups to lead a powerful evidence-based campaign for reform. The collaborative effort left MPs in no doubt that VAD was a safe and compassionate option supported by the vast majority of the community.

GGA offered educational resources and advice to MPs; organised forums with VAD experts from Victoria; helped Queenslanders share testimonies with media; and created advocate packs and a webinar to help supporters initiate conversations with their elected representatives.

GGA also led an advertising campaign to counter Catholic Church propaganda and helped organise a Covid-safe public vigil with 250 people outside parliament on the eve of the parliamentary debate.

GGA's resources, including the *Better Off Dead* podcast, were referred to numerous times by MPs during speeches in support of the bill.

In the end, the debate was dominated by the question of whether health institutions should have the right to block a resident's access to VAD. With GGA and Alliance support, MPs held the line and voted down all major amendments that would have blocked access to or weakened the bill.

GGA is proud to have campaigned alongside local advocacy groups and individuals including DWD Qld, The Clem Jones Group, Tanya Battel and the Gang of Four, and Nurses Supporting Voluntary Assisted Dying, led by Fiona Jacobs.

The Queensland law will come into effect in January 2023, following a 15-month implementation period.

New South Wales

"It's time for NSW to have this conversation. People in NSW should have the same options of end-of-life care as people in other states in Australia."

With these words Independent MP for Sydney Alex Greenwich announced his bid to shepherd a voluntary assisted dying bill through NSW parliament.

Mr Greenwich released his bill for public consultation in July and tabled it in parliament in October. It was backed by a record 28 MPs, including members of the government, crossbench and the Labor opposition – the highest number of co-sponsors to a bill in the history of any Australian parliament.

After three weeks of debate in November, the Legislative Assembly passed the Voluntary Assisted Dying Bill 2021 by 52 votes to 32. The bill now moves to the Upper House in 2022.

The final vote came after more than 160 amendments were moved, mostly by opponents. The vast majority were voted down and the bill survived intact.

It was the furthest a VAD bill had ever progressed in NSW. Australia's most populous state is now a step closer to joining every other state in passing a voluntary assisted dying law.

While the result is a cause for celebration, there is still a long way to go before NSW, arguably the most conservative state, joins the rest of Australia on the issue of VAD.

An Upper House inquiry will scrutinise the bill before a debate and vote in the Legislative Council, where the numbers are

incredibly tight. The majority endorsement in the Lower House, however, sends a strong message to MLCs not to vote down or tamper with the bill.

GGA partnered with Dying With Dignity NSW and other organisations to lead a media, social media and advertising campaign to overcome staunch resistance to even allowing the private member's bill to be debated.

That the bill (which lacked support from both the Premier and the Opposition Leader) was allowed time on the floor of parliament – and MPs given a free conscience vote – was a testament to the pressure applied by tens of thousands of supporters across the state and to the determination and political abilities of Mr Greenwich and his co-sponsors.

DWD NSW's powerful grassroots campaign in every electorate urging MPs to back the bill was expertly led by Penny Hackett, Shayne Higson and Heath Reed. Volunteers lobbied MPs, collected more than 110,000 signatures on a petition and, along with GGA, gathered more than 16,000 testimonies of needless suffering in the absence of a VAD law. More than 3,000 messages of support for more compassionate end-of-life choices were displayed in a Field of Hearts behind Parliament House.

The fight for a VAD law in NSW will continue in 2022 and will not end until NSW joins the rest of Australia in offering its residents a safe and compassionate end-of-life choice.

Dying With Dignity NSW's 'Field of Hearts'.
Photo by Shayne Higson.



Western Australia

In July, a 63-year-old Aboriginal woman from Perth became the first identified Western Australian to use the state's voluntary assisted dying law.

Mary-Ellen Passmore, a Wongatha-Yamatji woman, died in Perth on 29 July from motor neurone disease (MND). She was one of the first to be assessed under WA's Voluntary Assisted Dying Act.

Mrs Passmore had applied to be assessed for VAD soon after the law came into effect on 1 July.

Her children, sister, partner, and medical staff were at her bedside. The family described her death as "beautiful".

"All were singing along to 'Hallelujah', including her doctors," her sister said.

The family said Mrs Passmore confirmed her choice multiple times and thanked her doctors and VAD coordinator and "gave them her love".

"I feel very honoured to choose when and where I can die," Mrs Passmore told media before accepting the VAD medication. "I am excited because I won't have to suffer any more."

Mrs Passmore's family issued a brief statement after her death, saying she had received excellent care from everyone involved in the VAD process.

"We wish to express our gratitude that our proud Black mother, daughter, grandmother, sister, aunty, niece, cousin, godmother, friend, and mentor Mary-Ellen Passmore has been able to have her choice of a dignified death, voluntary assisted dying, finally fulfilled," the family said.

"We love you. We are proud of you. We always will be."

Mrs Passmore had lived with MND, a degenerative neurological condition, for up to 12 years. In her final few months the pain had become unbearable. She was totally bedridden, had difficulty speaking and swallowing and was fed through a tube.

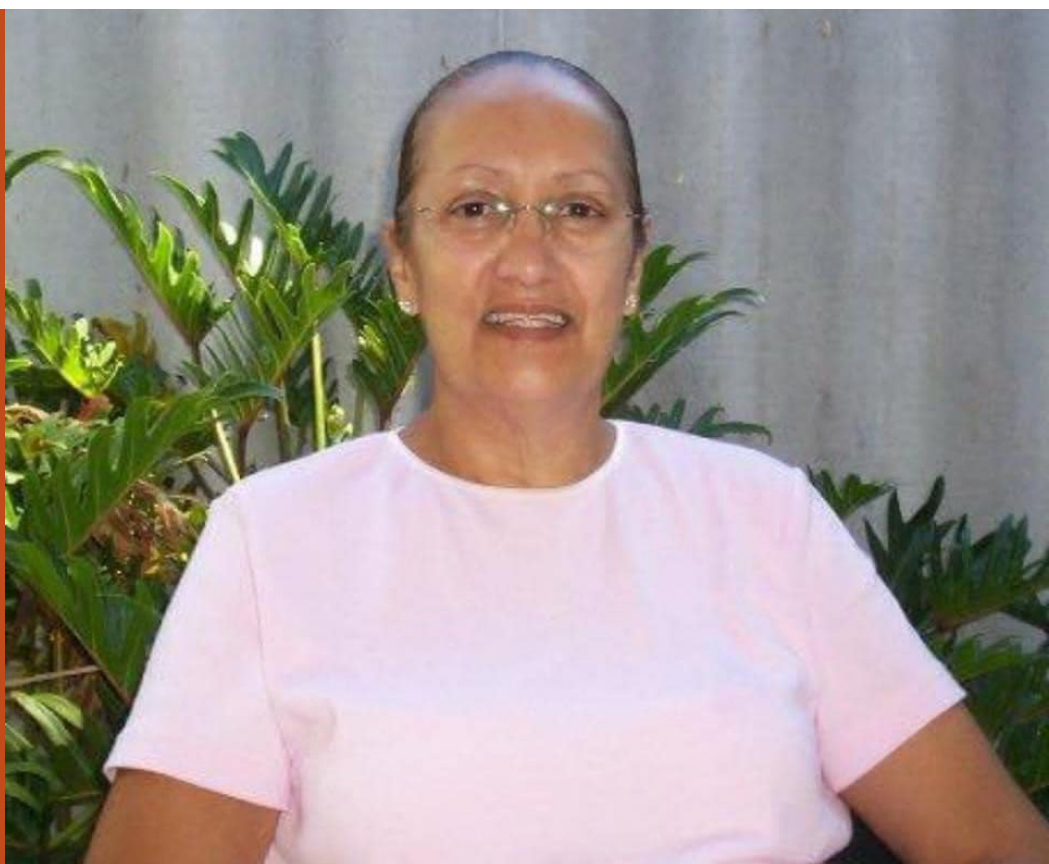
"It is terrifying being trapped by your own body and it's a relief to know there will be an end to my suffering," she said.

WA was the second state in the country to legalise medical assistance to die for people with life-limiting conditions in December 2019. By year's end, 50 eligible Western Australians had legally ended their lives under the law.

“

I feel very honoured to choose when and where I can die.

Mary-Ellen Passmore (right), one of the first Western Australians to access the state's assisted dying law.



Victoria

Two years have passed since Victoria became the first state in Australia to introduce voluntary assisted dying and "there is no doubt that Victoria has played an influential role in inspiring law reform across Australia", the Voluntary Assisted Dying Review Board said in its fifth and final biannual report into the operation of the landmark law. The board will now move to annual reporting.

The fifth report showed that 107 terminally ill Victorians chose a voluntary assisted death in the first six months of 2021 and 331 had made use of the Act since its inception in June 2019.

It found access to VAD was improving, with more doctors undertaking VAD training and assessments.

GGA welcomed the analysis saying it showed the Victorian law was operating safely and as intended.

The independent report also went a long way to reassure MPs in Queensland and New South Wales, who were debating the introduction of similar laws, that VAD was a safe and compassionate option.

Also included in the report for the first time was data around the intersection of VAD and palliative care. The report confirmed that 84% of VAD applicants were also receiving good palliative care, demonstrating that the two can work side by side to give dying Australians the best care and a real choice at the end of life.

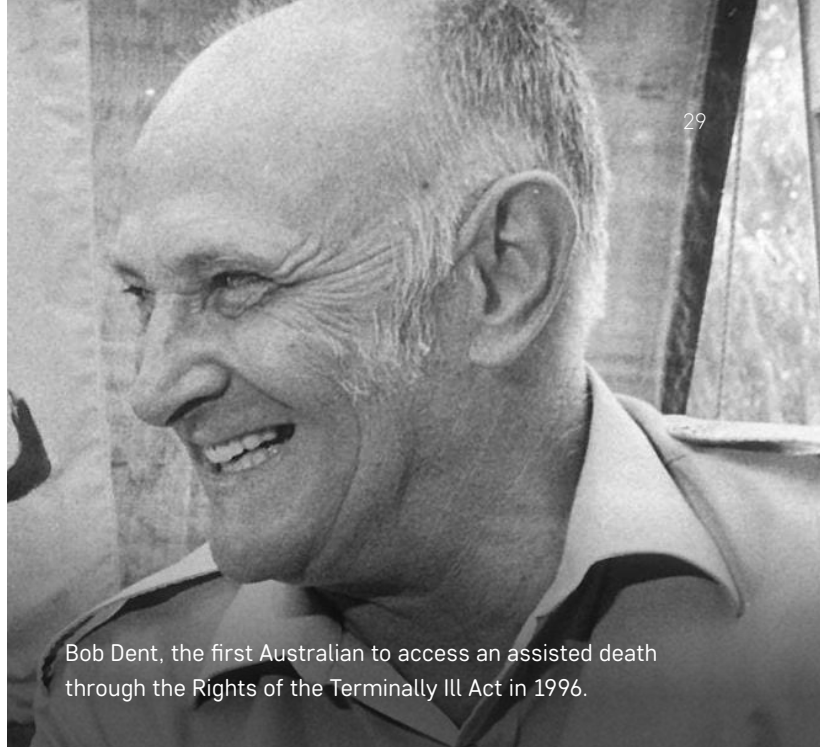
Other data revealed that the number of VAD deaths remained tiny – representing less than 0.4% of total deaths over the period; the average age of VAD applicants was 72 years, and 86% of applicants were living at home.

The report was the last to be issued by VAD Review Board Chair Justice Betty King, who announced she was stepping down from the role.



I have no doubt that we will continue to see an increase in the number of Victorians who consider voluntary assisted dying among their options for end-of-life care. I am proud to have been a part of ensuring that this option is accessible and safe."

**Justice (retired) Betty King,
Outgoing Chair of Victoria's VAD Review Board**



Bob Dent, the first Australian to access an assisted death through the Rights of the Terminally Ill Act in 1996.

Northern Territory and the ACT

The 22nd of September 2021 marked 25 years since Northern Territory resident Bob Dent became the first person in the world to die by legally-sanctioned voluntary euthanasia.

Three other people also used the Rights of the Terminally Ill Act in 1996 to end their lives before the Act was overturned by the Howard federal government.

Bob's widow, Judy, marked the anniversary by launching a mini-campaign to lobby the Commonwealth to reverse its law prohibiting the Northern Territory and the ACT from even discussing the issue.

"The name has changed to Voluntary Assisted Dying but the purpose remains the same – to give terminally-ill people control over the end of their life," Judy said.

"It is time for the federal parliament to undo the Euthanasia Laws bill and restore full citizenship rights to the people who live in the NT and the ACT."

Judy said as each state in turn passed a VAD law, her status compared to other Australians became even less equal. "I chose to become an Australian. I didn't expect to be a lesser citizen because I live in the NT."

In August, NT Senator Sam McMahon introduced a private member's Bill to restore the NT's right to make decisions on issues such as VAD. The bill attracted criticism from many quarters for not including the ACT. GGA prepared a submission to the ensuing Senate inquiry arguing there was no logical justification for continuing the prohibition given the law reform that has taken place in other states.

After a short inquiry, debate on the bill "was interrupted due to time constraints," to resume in 2022.

Farewelling Rodney Syme

This year saw the death of Dr Rodney Syme who more than any other person made possible the legalisation of voluntary assisted dying across Australia. Andrew Denton reflects on the life of this remarkable man.

Rodney came from medical royalty. His father, Bob, had been a respected surgeon. His grandfather, Sir George 'Silent' Syme, had left his established medical practice at age 54 to tend to the wounded at Gallipoli, and on his return founded the Royal Australasian College of Surgeons.

Rodney could have remained, comfortably ensconced, as one of Victoria's most respected urologists, but in his 40s he met a patient called Betty who had untreatable neuropathic pain. He recounted what happened when I interviewed him for the first series of *Better Off Dead* back in 2016:

She was on the first floor, and it was agonising. I would come to visit her and sit in my car – I can remember it well – for 5 minutes, trying to summon up the strength to go and see her. That was bad enough for me. Imagine what it was like for her and her family...

If I'd been in that pain, I didn't have the slightest doubt that I would have ended my own life rather than go on like that. And of course, I knew that that was possible for me. I was a doctor and I had access to medication... I had colleagues who I knew could help me if I needed help. So, I thought ... What is ethical about me being able to end my own suffering but my patients have to go on? And that really changed my whole life. For the next 20 years after that, I thought very, very deeply. I studied the medical literature, the bioethical

literature. And formulating my views, I began to make public statements. And as a consequence, complete strangers started to approach me.

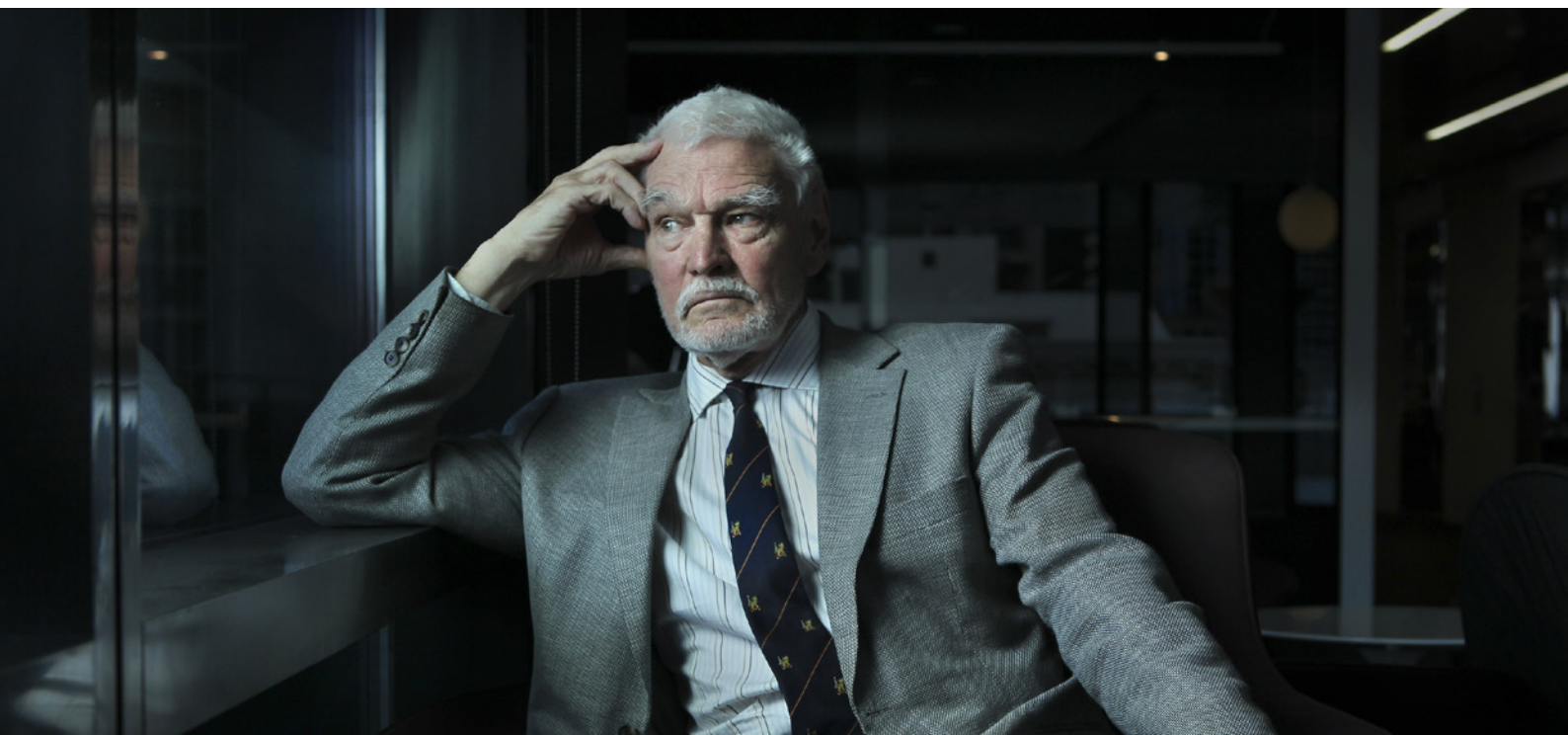
Over the next four decades, Rodney would go on to counsel thousands of people seeking assistance to die.

I witnessed this first hand when I stayed with Rodney at his place on Phillip Island. The first night I was there, three calls came in, one after the other, from people seeking Rodney's help. I listened as he carefully and patiently interrogated their situation and answered their questions. He didn't rush to either judgement or conclusions, but sought to reassure them that this was just the first conversation, one to be continued. Each call took about an hour and Rodney's evenness and careful note-taking never wavered. His was the embodiment of what the Dutch call "due care".

He did all this in the face of disapproval and black-banning from senior members of his profession, investigations by police and hearings into his fitness to practice; truly a man of principle.

When asked by ABC TV's Q&A host Tony Jones if he was actually trying to provoke the police to prosecute him and put him on trial, Rodney replied without hesitation:

Yes, indeed, because I would argue... that I can produce and provide a person with medication which provides them with



palliation, relieves the psychological and existential suffering which they have when they are facing a dreadful death and I believe that is a palliative act.

Had Rodney been found guilty of assisting a suicide, he was liable to up to five years in jail. Who else can you think of, in this country's recent history, courageous enough to put their liberty on the line in order to help others?

It is telling that no arrest was ever made. No court case ever held. Such was the fierce clarity of Rodney's thinking, backed by years of reading and unmatched professional experience, that only a fool would have put him on the stand for cross-examination.

I don't know – and perhaps only Rodney's careful records will reveal – how many people he provided with medication which gave them control over their final weeks and months. I do know that, every time he did it, he was breaking the law. His courage, compassion and 'due care' made a profound difference to their lives.

In this work, as in his advocacy for VAD, Rodney was tireless. For decades, Australian advocates – back to Marshall Perron in Darwin in 1995 – have turned to Rodney for advice, counsel, and reassurance.



Always, he was there. Always, his opinion clear and deeply thought-through. Rodney was more experienced in end-of-life and its many forms than any other person alive.

What Rodney was not was a zealot. Though his principles were unshakeable, he didn't allow the rightness of his thinking to blind him to political reality. Even though Rodney firmly believed in a VAD law based on suffering, he understood that any such law in Australia would only pass if it also had a time limit. As such, he got behind the ultimately successful campaign to legalise VAD in Victoria in 2017 – a success which has seen the dominoes of all but one other State fall.

Even a fortnight before his death, Rodney was still actively trying to organise a national body to pool VAD knowledge and seeking better methods for practitioner administration to lessen doctors' load when asked to end another's life.

He was indefatigable. Unbreakable. Or so it seemed.

But, now, the mighty oak has fallen. There seems a vast, empty space in the forest where he once stood. That familiar, comforting shadow no longer cast.

However, forests are not just a series of individual trees. They are an interconnected ecosystem of underground roots sharing nourishment and information.

For years now, the mighty oak of Rodney Syme, has quietly nourished each of us; with information, and by example. While his passing fills us with grief – and we will miss him in our bones as mentor, friend, and guide – we carry with us Rodney's life's work; Rodney's method; Rodney's unshakeable commitment to principle. When he died his son, Bruce, sent me a message: *"The great man has gone."*

He goes with every honour and with our deepest gratitude and love.

– Andrew Denton

In Remembrance

Vale Lyn Bailey

In October, we lost Lyn Bailey, a committed advocate for end-of-life choice. Lyn was a member of the Gang of Four, a formidable group of determined terminally ill women who had a profound impact on many politicians debating VAD in Queensland.

Diagnosed with stage 4 vaginal cancer, Lyn wrote to MPs ahead of the debate detailing the medical horrors she was enduring: "What I have had to go through over the last year, what I am going through now, is so deeply personal and intimate for anyone to have to share but I realise if I don't share this nightmare then politicians who make decisions about end-of-life choices, who think they know what suffering is, will never know... This is SUFFERING.

"People need end-of-life options. They need the option of voluntary assisted dying. They need to be able to say 'enough is enough'."

Fellow advocate Tanya Battel paid tribute to Lyn after her death:

Today we mourn the loss and share inconsolable grief at the passing of our beautiful dear friend and fellow VAD advocate, Lyn Bailey, who passed away late yesterday. There are no words to describe the last 18 months Lyn had to endure as a result of her journey with lung and vaginal cancer, except to say her journey was the reason why we fought, and continue to fight, so hard for legislation across Australia...

Lyn was strong, she was courageous, she was kind, she was compassionate, she was honest, she was straight-forward and she was truly an amazing lady. The world is too quiet a place today – we usually chatted on Sundays for a couple of hours. Much love to Lyn's family at this sad time. We will miss you so very much, Lyn. I will miss you so very much. See you on the other side, darling friend xx."

Tanya Battel

To our donors, thank you.

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Go Gentle Australia is an expert advisory and health promotion charity founded by Andrew Denton to spark a national conversation about end-of-life choices, including voluntary assisted dying. Our focus is on promoting evidence that is based on established facts and peer-reviewed research.

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Go Gentle Australia has been established to help relieve the distress, helplessness and suffering experienced by Australians with untreatable or terminal illnesses, their families and carers.

If you would like to learn more, visit us at gogentleaustralia.org.au

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